
Family Literacy

A Review of Programs and Critical Perspectives

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June 2003



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For over 20 years educational policies have promoted family literacy programs in schools and community-based organizations. Family literacy appears in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Reading Excellence Act, Workforce Investment Act, Community Services Block Grant Act, and the Head Start Act (National Center for Family Literacy, 2002). In this research review, we (1) define family literacy, (2) describe critical perspectives on family literacy programs, (3) draw out the guiding program principles they suggest, and (4) illustrate how these principles are implemented in three different programs.

What Is Family Literacy?

Family Literacy

The term family literacy is used in several ways: (1) to describe the study of literacy in the family, (2) to describe a set of interventions related to literacy development of young children, and (3) to refer to a set of programs designed to enhance the literacy skills of more than one family member (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Handel, 1999; Wasik et al., 2000).

This review explores family literacy in the second and third sense. It focuses on intergenerational family literacy programs that work with the family rather than on the child or the adult separately. Such programs assume that the greatest impact on literacy development is achieved by combining the effects of early childhood interventions, early parenting strategies, increased adult literacy, and enhanced parental support for children's school related functioning (St. Pierre, Layzar & Barnes, 1995).

Family literacy draws on multiple academic traditions, among them adult literacy, English as a second language education, child literacy education—in particular the field of emergent literacy and special education, early childhood development, cognitive psychology, and parent education. To understand family literacy, however, two other concepts must be considered: literacy and emergent literacy.

Literacy

Literacy was once defined as the ability to read and write. It was considered a set of neutral and objective skills independent of social context or ideology (Street, 1995; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Ethnographic research has shed light on a wide range of culturally specific literacy practices among different communities. This research provides evidence that literacy involves much more than encoding and decoding symbols, and is much more complex and difficult to define (Bowman, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Heath, 1983; Valdés, 1996).

Literacy extends beyond the acquisition of reading and writing skills. It entails the ability to use these skills in a socially appropriate context. The very notion of literacy is also evolving to include the skills required to function in a technological society. For example, literacy has come to be used to refer to a wider domain of activities, from media literacy and computer literacy to citizenship literacy (Kinzer & Leander,

2003; Wilson, 2002). With this in mind, family literacy programs must address an expanded definition of literacy in all its complexity.

Emergent Literacy

The term *emergent literacy* denotes a developmental continuum along which children's literacy is acquired. Literacy is not an all-or-none phenomenon that begins when children start school. Rather, it has its origins early in the life of a child.

Emergent literacy consists of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are developmental precursors to more established forms of literate behavior (Whitehurst & Longigan, 1998). It develops not only as a result of direct instruction, but also as a product of a stimulating and responsive environment (Arzubiaga, Rueda, & Lilia, 2002). Components of emergent literacy include phonemic awareness, concepts of print and story, reading styles, and literacy as social or cultural practice (Purcell-Gates, 2001). Research clearly shows that good emergent literacy skills are likely to enhance children's school experiences and help them get started on the path to reading success (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002).

Critical Perspectives on Family Literacy Programs

A growing body of research suggests that despite their good intentions, family literacy programs are inadvertently undermining the very families they attempt to help. These arguments fall into four main categories:

1. The deficit model
2. The research vacuum
3. The silent gendered discourse
4. The missing social-constructivist perspective

1. The Deficit Model

Critics of family literacy programs argue that programs are often based on the underlying premise that low-income families are too deficient in literacy practices, parenting skills, and knowledge to support effective child learning, and hence require regulation and education to ensure that they literacy is promoted (Auerbach, 1995; Handel, 1999; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001). Schools attempt to transmit literacy practices into the home, regardless of their cultural relevance and acknowledgement of families' existing literacy practices (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Despite trying to be culturally sensitive the solutions presented are in fact culture-specific and prescriptive, leading toward conformity to particular values and expectations. Many family literacy programs begin with a deficit stance that emphasizes parents' need to improve and reluctance to get involved. Alternatively, these programs might choose to focus on what parents are already doing and how to reinforce and support their knowledge and skills (Nakagawa, McKinnon & Hackett, 2001).

2. The Research Vacuum

Critics of family literacy programs also argue that a research vacuum exists in relation to the most effective ways for programs to work with families and children (Yaden & Paratore, 2003). Hannon (1999) argues that “successful programs” require children and parents to derive clearly identifiable benefits from participating in the programs. The assumption of many two-generational programs is that parents gain more than they would from conventional adult education programs, and that children will gain more than they would from early childhood education parent involvement programs. While there is now limited evidence from Britain and the U.S. to support claims that intergenerational family literacy programs have positive educational effects, there is none to show that they have greater effects, or are more cost-effective, than separate child-focused or adult-focused programs (Hannon, 1999). Policies that promote family literacy programs will need to invest in their documentation and evaluation. Much has to be learned about programmatic factors that bring about change in children, adults, and families.

3. The Silent Gendered Discourse

Other critics suggest that family literacy programs, whose participants tend to be women, often confine them to a domestic sphere (Luttrell, 1996; Weiler, 1991). Using feminist theories, they argue that family literacy programs should instead empower mothers to question the role of authority, recognize the importance of personal experience as a source of knowledge, and explore the perspectives of different races, class, and culture. For instance, in Australia, Kirsten Hutchinson (2000) applies this lens to her work by having women research their own literacy socialization and their family’s literacy practices. Instead of being receivers of transmitted knowledge the women investigate their own reading behaviors and those of their children. Hutchinson uses the women’s collective knowledge as a curriculum to inform them about the key principles involved in the teaching of reading, writing, math, and computer literacy in schools. By being engaged in an analysis of their own existing literacy practices, the women come to see the authority in their knowledge. They recognize their own experiences as valid.

4. The Missing Social Constructivist Perspective

Critics argue that family literacy programs present notions of family and literacy that are divorced from their social and political contexts. Perhaps the most influential proponent of this paradigm was Paulo Freire who showed that literacy is and should be more than a set of neutral and objective skills. He contended that the purpose of literacy programs cannot be viewed as simply for the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant standard language. For literacy to become meaningful it has to be situated and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and make sense of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Orellana, 1996; Osterling, 2001). Family literacy programs that adhere to Freire’s paradigm are considered part of the social change paradigm (Auerbach, 1995; Neuman, 1995). These programs maintain participant control, invoke dialogue as a key pedagogical process, develop content that centers on critical social issues from participants’ lives, and create pathways for action and social change.

Emerging Principles for Family Literacy Programs

From these critical perspectives it is possible to outline several principles to guide the development and implementation of family literacy programs. These perspectives suggest that programs should:

- Strive to understand parents' literacy strengths and reinforce their knowledge and skills.
- Believe that literacy is acquired through shared dialogue, where learners are actively contributing to their own learning.
- Provide opportunities for adults and children to reflect on literacy practices in their daily lives.
- Recognize the literacy history of parents and that all parents come with some memories of literacy.
- Grow out of needs of participants and examine resources in a sociocultural context.
- Adopt an empowerment philosophy and take action to break down patterns of social isolation.
- Respond to the interests of adults and children.
- Document their experiences and learn from them, which at the same time contributes to building a research base for family literacy.

Examples of the application of some of these principles can be found in the three programs described below. These programs specifically focus on immigrant families.

The Pajaro Valley Experience

Through discussions of children's literature parents explore new strategies to develop children's reading and writing skills and contribute to their own learning. Parents reflect on their own lives as a source of knowledge and are encouraged to understand that they are critical to their children's development regardless of their schooling (Ada, 1993). With their newly acquired skills, parents read to their children and question them about their understanding of the story using description, personal interpretation, analysis, and creativity.

In 1986 Alma Flor Ada gathered groups of Spanish-speaking parents and their children to meet and discuss children's literature, and to read the stories and poems written by the children and their parents (Ada, 1988). Sponsored by the bilingual program of the Pajaro Valley School District, the program grew out of the knowledge of the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education. The program aimed to foster parents' awareness of the significance of their role and their opportunities and responsibilities for their children's future. The program encouraged parents and school-aged children to spend time together every evening with a book, and offered guidance to improve children's reasoning and clarity of expression. In monthly meetings, Mexican migrant parents and teachers met at the local library to read aloud a children's book. After the reading a teacher from the school (and family members as they became more confident) guided a four-part discussion.

1. The descriptive phase provided opportunities for parents and children to discuss questions related to information and content of the story. (E.g., What happened? Why?)
2. The personal interpretative phase focused on a dialogue about parents' and children's feelings about the story and its connections to previous personal experience. (E.g., Have you ever felt? What do you do when?)
3. The critical phase allows parents to analyze story events and ideas. (E.g., How might the character have responded differently?)
4. The creative phase explores the discovery of the story's real-life applications. (E.g., If you were in this situation, what would you do?)

In adapting this program to meet the needs of families in Carpintera, California, Delgado-Gaitan (2001) noted that learning was more effective when it involved classroom teachers as the key instructors. Delgado-Gaitan found that all too often parent facilitators were confused about the pre-designed questioning categories that parents had to ask their children. She recommended that questions should be generated naturally from the parents themselves and in the way they feel most comfortable. She also concluded that "the most important part of their learning was not the category of the question they taught their children to ask, but the close interaction they experienced through reading with their children" (p.188).

Intergenerational Literacy Project

In this family literacy program, parents extend their own literacy and language while learning about ways to support their children in U.S. schools. Parents attend morning or evening classes to read and respond to literacy materials of personal interest, learn strategies and ideas to share books with their children, and share their family literacy experiences with their friends and teachers. Classes are divided into four parts: daily reflections, large group discussions, small group analysis, and small group summary.

Working in a small urban community in Massachusetts, the Intergenerational Literacy Project (ILP) serves mainly immigrant families who seek to improve their English literacy and language, and to become familiar with ways to support children's education. The program has been in existence for over 10 years. Classes are offered in both the morning and evening and have been held in various locations throughout the years, including community centers and schools.

The ILP is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to children's development. This approach proposes that children grow and learn in various contexts and are influenced by the interactions between each of the environments. Thus, the home environment and parents' literacy skills and practices influence children's cognitive development.

The ILP is also influenced by the work of Luis Moll and his colleagues (1992) who coined the term "funds of knowledge." Funds of knowledge are "the essential bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive." Through this approach students' and families' experiences and knowledge can be used as learning resources in school. The ILP seeks to understand how

families' literacy experiences outside school can help them in their learning of academic literacy.

Each ILP class is staffed by an instructional team of two literacy teachers and three literacy tutors. The teachers are students and researchers at nearby universities. The class readings consists of original English literature that has not been simplified or watered down. Parents also might bring readings to class from home. A typical class session consists of several instructional groupings:

- Parents work individually to record their previous day's literacy activities and then share their literacy log entries.
- The whole class takes turns reading aloud portion of the day's reading (which is generally displayed on an overhead projector) and teachers build on the learner's previous knowledge.
- In small groups, parents read the day's article more and discuss ideas and vocabulary.
- Small group members, including teachers and tutors, summarize and give their opinions on what they have read.

While parents are in class, children participate in a free on-site early childhood education classroom that is designed to facilitate children's language and literacy development.

The program places emphasis on situating literacy experiences within the "fabric of daily life rather than on the creation of school-like contexts in the home setting." Further, parents are encouraged to join with their children in multiple uses of literacy including reading and writing oral histories, composing letters to friends and family members, journal keeping, story writing, and publishing. Parents are also taught how to help children with homework, the types of questions they might ask the classroom teacher to learn about their children's progress, and the types of questions they might ask their children to learn about the school day.

Qualitative case study research with families participating in the ILP suggests that family literacy programs that serve immigrant parents are wise to make explicit the mainstream culture and values of U.S. schooling as well as build on household funds of knowledge to support children's success (Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair, 1999).

Jane Addams School for Democracy

In learning circles, Hmong and Spanish adult immigrants learn English and study for the U.S. citizenship test while their children participate in a variety of literacy activities. Unlike many literacy development programs, the Jane Addams School for Democracy avoids following an elaborate manual with scripted exercises. Instead, groups come together informally and co-create the learning process. Learning circles are divided into two clusters: large circle and learning pairs.

Jane Addams School for Democracy (the School) is a community-based education and action initiative, located in Neighborhood House, a 105-year-old settlement

house in a longtime immigrant neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. The School was created in 1996 as a partnership among Hmong and Latino leaders at the Neighborhood House, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota (UMN), the University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts, and the College of St. Catherine. The School does not use prescribed methods of instruction to teach the English language or prepare immigrants for the citizen exam. Rather learning occurs in context in a socially relevant and transformative space where everyone interacts as both learner and teacher. The primary method for achieving this goal is *the learning circle*¹ (Family Involvement Network of Educators, 2002).

A learning circle is a group of 8–12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times to talk about different themes and topics. Issues develop from the community and range in subjects from education to democracy or mental health. In the learning circle, everyone has an equal voice, and people try to understand each other's views. They do not have to agree with each other. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better. A facilitator helps the group focus on different views and makes sure the discussion goes well.

The School hosts three learning circles: the Hmong adult circle, the Spanish-speaking adult circle, and the children's circle, with children of various cultural backgrounds. In the Hmong adult circle most residents are studying for their citizenship exam. After a lively cultural exchange as a large group, participants break into learning pairs (Hmong speakers paired with English-speaking partners) or small groups for language practice. What is notable about this work is that “everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner.” In other words, doctoral students, university professors, high school students, and immigrants are all equally useful sources of knowledge. For example, while one of the cofounders taught a Hmong woman to drive, the Hmong woman helped her create a garden for her home; while learning English from high school students, the Hmong women in return taught high school classes in cooking and dressmaking.

Like the Hmong adult circle, participants in the Spanish adult circle work in pairs to exchange language skills. The group also holds experiential learning sessions, such as potluck dinners, where participants share dishes connected to their cultural backgrounds and have conversations in Spanish and English.

The children's circle is a space co-created by the children, their older siblings, and college students. More than 60 children per night gather together, speaking a variety of languages—both verbal and nonverbal. While they make crafts, cook, read, and learn photography, the children also teach college students and all of the participants how to play, create, listen, and learn. They help students find meaning in and give direction to their academic studies.

¹ The culture circle (or learning circle) method of instruction is credited to Paulo Freire. The culture circle is a discussion group in which educators and learners use codifications (representations of the learner's day-to-day situations such as a photograph, drawing, or word) to engage in dialogue about their daily and life experience. The peer group provides the theoretical context for reflection and for transforming interpretations of reality from mere opinion to a more critical knowledge (Freire, 1973).

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Gigliana Melzi of New York University for her valuable feedback on earlier drafts.

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