

Review of Family Literacy Programming Literature

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on current and past literature as it relates to family literacy. Reviews that related to models of literacy programming that include a library instruction component were considered as part of this review. Overall, researchers perceived that there are transformative long term benefits for the participating families involved with literacy programs that include a library instructional unit. Also apparent was that Family Literacy staff needed solid research-based professional development to work with families to provide educational opportunities that will assist families in improving their futures.

Review of Family Literacy Programming Literature

Family Literacy has been described as a social constructivist learning environment (Cook-Cottone, 2004). Family literacy is achieved through a variety of several different educational models. Models may differ in parental expectations, teaching strategies, language acquisition programming, and library instruction. An alternate family literacy program model contains a parenting education component in place of the library instruction. This particular review of literature will focus on those models that include a library instructional component while not making a judgment on one model as compared to the other. The very nature of family literacy practice allows an adult and a child living in a single family structure to construct a literacy knowledge base through social interactions. This multi-generational model of learning has been researched and documented through a variety of studies (Antonucci, 2005; Cook-Cottone, 2004; Gadsden, 1994; Gadsden & Hall, 1996; Mikulecky, January 1996). Additionally, a strong case for inclusion of a library component has been indicated through research (Comings, Cuban, Bos, & Porter, 2003; Spangenberg, 1996).

For the purposes of this review, authentic literacy is defined as being able to use the skills to decode symbols for comprehension and to build meaning within the context of a student's life situation (Schmoker, 1999). Functional illiteracy of adults on multiple levels remains a problem ("National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)," 2003). This functional illiteracy of adults plagues families through lack of literacy and low school achievement for the children in these families (Gadsden, 2002).

Spangenberg (1996) purported the importance of library instruction in her seminal research work in the late 1990's. Spangenberg also noted that literacy education was not on the favored list of politicians to receive funding support in 1996, nor is it recognized

as a primary factor in educational achievement today. This lack of funding in both research and programming has created a vacuum of program availability and may place an increased burden on public schools for literacy skill development.

Some literacy organizations continue to provide services and employ solid practices to assist the functionally illiterate with authentic literacy skill development. Comprehensive family literacy programs provide opportunities for literacy services for both the enrolled parent and children. The expected outcome of the family literacy program is that both the parent's and the child's literacy levels will be impacted. It has been noted that over 7000 public libraries, as well as many additional library branches, have provided literacy instruction within a public library setting for the purposes of literacy development (Spangenberg, 1996).

Some literacy research (Comings et al., 2003; Gadsden, 1994; Merrill, 2006) indicated that empowerment of participants is both possible and desired through the transformative act of learning. Transformational learning, or learning that enables change in the life of a student or family to occur, is the embodiment of authentic literacy education.

Goals identified by participants in a 2003 research report included those which were "instrumental" or incremental goals that would provide a foundation to attain an ultimate goal. These "transformational" goals would create significant changes in the life situation of the participant. (Comings et al., 2003).

Family Literacy has been implemented in all 50 states due to federal support through the 105th congressional inclusion of family literacy funding in the Workforce Investment Act, the Head Start Act, the Community Services Block Grant Act and the Reading Excellence Act. Even Start Family Literacy Programs are found throughout all

50 states and support the development of literacy skills in families at both the elementary and secondary school levels.

The impact of successful Family Literacy programming has been chronicled by many organizations including The William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program (Even Start), National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF), National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NSCALL), National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center (ILRDC), and the U. S. Department of Education. In addition, it has been recognized that the diversity among family literacy programs across the country create much difficulty in providing research-based evaluation of effectiveness ("Goodling institute for research in family literacy," 2005).

The National Institute for Family Literacy (NIFL) provided strong indicators toward educational achievement when a family literacy program was present. The following statistics were recorded in an NIFL Issue Brief released in 2002:

1. 60% of principals in Title I schools reported low parental involvement as a barrier to high academic achievement.
2. 64% of public schools with a high poverty level reported low parental involvement as a barrier to high academic achievement.
3. One of the most significant indicators of student success is the highest level of educational attainment by the child's mother.
4. Only 42% of children whose mothers did not complete high school are read aloud to daily.

5. Kindergartners whose mothers have higher educational attainment are more likely to score in the highest quartile in reading and math than other comparison groups. (Clarke, 2002).

In 1997, The Library of Congress (LOC) held a policy forum to discuss the pivotal role of the public library to the field of adult literacy. Spangenberg (1997) was quoted in the *LOC Information Bulletin* as saying, "I sincerely hope that literacy and library professionals across the country will take up the report's challenge and do everything in their power to protect and develop the public library role in adult literacy." This report was prepared to highlight and establish the multiple roles that the public library played in supporting literacy development and the difficult funding challenge that threatened to eliminate literacy services (Spangenberg, 1997). The necessity and the natural affiliation between literacy achievement and the mission of the public library system were noted. Affiliation is found today in programs that adhere to this call for literacy programs and public libraries to collaborate.

Benefits for Children

According to a study conducted with 248 kindergarten students and their families, children whose families engaged in both the school and home literacy activities made significantly greater gains in language scores than the children whose families did not participate. These gains were measured by subtests of vocabulary, story comprehension, and sequencing in storytelling. The greatest gains were found in students who started out with low language skills at pretest and were given strong home literacy support through family literacy activities. Parents in this study demonstrated strong levels of participation in the literacy activities. They reported high levels of satisfaction with the literacy

activities and their child's achievement in literacy skill development (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000).

The Northeast Regional Advisory Committee (NE RAC) found complete consensus that equipping children with broad communication skills in both oral and written language will have a substantial effect on achieving the standards expressed in the No Child Left Behind Legislation ("No Child Left Behind: An overview," 2007). One of the many recommendations made by NE RAC was that institutions of higher education should have the needed assistance available to help prepare pre-service teachers in a solid understanding of the sub-groups most affected by low-literacy skills including English as Second Language (ESL) learners, families of learners identified with literacy challenges, emergent literacy, and adolescent literacy learners. Schmoker's (1999) review of literacy education and the subsequent call for authentic literacy instruction provides a strong argument for active authentic literacy learning and the on-going positive effects that authentic literacy learning would create within the public school setting. Family literacy programs could have a tremendous affect on the achievement of school districts toward their mandated goals.

Parent and Child Learning Together

Jacobs (2004) wrote that parent and child time spent in language acquisition and literacy skill development provides a strong learning environment where children and adults can achieve solid results. Other researchers (Gadsden, 1994; Grinder, Longoria Saenz, Askov, & Aldemir, 2005) have noted that children's language and literacy development are increased through the direct involvement of their parents.

Generation to generation learning has been identified as one of the strongest means of empowering families to build learning opportunities ("Family Literacy & You,"

2006; Grinder et al., 2005; Knell & Scogins, 1999). The development of literacy skills in children who are at-risk of failing in the public school system may be dependent upon the empowerment and transformational learning development of their parents or caregivers. Mikulecky (1996) reported that the activity of using oral language between a parent and a child may be as important to the literacy process as providing children with printed materials in the home. This concept supports the research noted by Knell & Scogins (1999), Puchner (1995), Sears (2005), and Wasik (2004) that congruent instruction in both reading and development of oral language skills within a family are both critical elements of instruction to creating a positive learning environment within the home.

Past research (Berlin & Sum, 1988; "Family Literacy & You," 2006; Gadsden & Hall, 1996) indicated that the parent's educational achievement, particularly the mother's education, has a significant impact on the child's achievement level. Gasden and Hall (1996) purported that one reason for the emphasis on the correlation between the mother's education and the child's educational achievement is partially due a lack of research regarding the father's impact on the child's literacy development. Over a decade later, research regarding a father's role is still significantly smaller than the research analyzing the mother's role in intergenerational learning. Intergenerational learning has shown essential benefit to both the parent and the child when equitable educational opportunities are provided for the family ("Family Literacy & You," 2006).

Cranton (1994; 2006) noted that for students to experience transformative learning, learning that enables the building new of knowledge, it is necessary to have a teaching staff committed to teaching transformative learning strategies. Research in the area of training staff with the skills and strategies needed to provide services in research-based instruction that can provide transformative skills to enrolled families continues to

be a significant need in the field of family literacy (Gadsden, 2002; Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy Think Tank, 2001). Schmoker (1999) called transformative learning strategies authentic literacy skills. Building authentic literacy skills for parents leads to the development of literacy skills in a child.

Focusing on Family Literacy Programming

Measurable outcomes have been noted for Family Literacy programs which provide the following services:

1. The improvement of literacy skills of the parent or caregiver.
2. The understanding of the role that education plays in the lives of an adult and child.
3. The inclusion of a child and adult literacy interaction or Parent and Child Together (PACT) activity.
4. The inclusion of child and adult interaction with a library component (Paratore, 2003).

Measurable improvements for participating families were noted in adult literacy in prose, documents, and quantitative literacy and the children were be more likely to succeed in an educational setting (Mikulecky, 1996). Family literacy staff must build programs and lead participants to engage in the four selected components of family literacy programs.

The precepts of the National Center for Family Literacy ("Teacher Resources: All Your Parents - Part 3: Develop Relationships," 2006) has built professional development opportunities to assist family literacy staff in creating opportunities to build trust between staff and parental participants in family literacy programs. Additionally, it is noted by Gadsden (2002) that professional development in family literacy programs continues to be an area that has been limited by little research being conducted in the field. To have

successful family literacy programs, family literacy staff needs strong professional development based on research to allow strong measurable outcomes to become a reality for their participating families (Gadsden & Hall, 1996).

Final Considerations

A review of reports to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (Comings, 2003); U. S. Department of Education (Baron, 2003); Guide to quality: Even Start family literacy program (RMC Research Corporation, June, 2001); and Literacy in Libraries Across America Project, funded by the Wallace Foundation, (Porter, Cuban, Comings, & Chase, May 2005) indicated that knowing and using research in adult education is of critical importance for future implementation of adult literacy within a family literacy program. Strong considerations for professional development activities for family literacy providers throughout the United States will assist staff in guiding participants into a transformative learning environment that will truly change lives.

Reviewing past research in the areas of family literacy will assist family literacy staff as they work together with families who are struggling with illiteracy to provide solid educational opportunities to build a future together. Additional research in family literacy to determine effectiveness of various models needs to be continued with the specific goal of adding to the overall knowledge of how library instruction supports the acquisition of literacy skills development and adds to a transformative learning environment.

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