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Family Literacy: Directions in Research and Implications for Practice -- January 1996

Family Literacy: Parent and Child Interactions

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The relationship between children's literacy and children's interactions with their parents has long been recognized as significant. A growing body of research on how parents and children deal with literacy, language, and schools in general reveals a tapestry of complex interrelationships. Dozens of research studies reveal that approaches to changing parent-child literacy interactions are generally successful. Studies also reveal that simple interventions are of limited success and that it is very difficult to bring about change that transfers to improved literacy in the home.

Aspects of Parent-Child Interactions

Parent-child interactions are important to a child's developing literacy abilities. It is becoming increasingly clear that these interactions involve a good deal more than simply reading to children and providing them with books . . . (A) growing body of research indicates that the way in which a parent speaks with a child may have as much or more to do with later reading achievement of the child than actual time spent reading to the child.

Research over the past two decades has established several aspects of parent-child interactions associated with children's later literacy success. Among these are:

- parental reading to and with children;
- complexity of language and strategy used between parents and children;
- parental conceptions of the roles of education and literacy; and
- literacy modeling and support present in the home environment.

Parental Reading to and with Children

Research from the 1970s and 1980s consistently identifies and reports strong correlations between parental reading to and with children and children's later success with literacy (Chomsky, 1972; Laosa, 1982; Anderson et al., 1985; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). More recent research has attempted to identify the essential nature of what transpires during parent-child reading times to make them so beneficial. Lancy and Bergin (1992) found children who are more fluent and positive about reading came from parent-child pairs

who viewed reading as fun, kept stories moving with a "semantic" rather than a "decoding" orientation, and encouraged questions and humor while reading. Tracey and Young (1994) studied the home reading of accelerated and at-risk readers and their college-educated mothers. They found no difference in the frequency of children's oral reading during first grade and, indeed, found at-risk readers to actually do more oral reading in second and third grade than did accelerated readers. Tracey (1995), in a later analysis of video-taped reading sessions with accelerated and at-risk readers, notes striking differences in the degree to which the accelerated reader received more physical and verbal attention, support, and extended oral feedback. In a more in-depth study of more than 40 families, Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein and Scher (1994) analyzed differences between literacy activities of low- and middle-income families.

Low-income parents reported doing more reading practice and homework (e.g., flashcards, letter-practice) with their kindergarten age children than did middle-income parents; and middle-income parents reported only slightly more joint book reading with their children than did low-income families. These middle-income parents did, however, report a good deal more play with print and more independent reading by children. The nature of what transpires during reading time appears to matter a good deal--perhaps more than the mere fact that parent-child reading occurs.

Complexity of Language and Strategy Use

For more than a decade, Snow and her colleagues have been examining the role of language use by parents and children during reading and in other family activities such as dinner-time conversations and explanatory talk (Snow & Goldfield, 1983; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill, 1991; Beals, 1992; Beals & De Temple, 1992). This body of work indicates that explanatory talk during mealtimes, and to some extent during reading, plays a greater role in predicting children's later reading achievement in school and on tests than does simply reading to children. Further, the aspect of explanatory talk which seems most relevant are non-immediate or non-literal comments such as those associated with predictions, elaborations, and linking new ideas to previous experiences. An example of such comments is the parent who encourages a child to orally compare a caterpillar's cocoon to the child's sleeping bag while reading a children's book about caterpillars and then further asking for predictions of what the child thinks will happen next.

Lancy, Draper and Boyce (1989) describe the parents of good readers as using expansionist strategies which included graduated support or scaffolding as children attempted to understand stories as well as strategies for avoiding frustration. The parent might begin the story and do much of the talking in the form of modeling the making of predictions. Over time the parent speaks less and encourages the child to take a more active role in reading or telling the story. This is easier with books read multiple times. If children experience great difficulty, the parents of good readers would help with the difficulty or perhaps make a joke. Parents of poor readers are described by Lancy et al. as using reductionist strategies which focus upon decoding, focused criticism, and

sometimes even covering pictures to avoid a child's "cheating" in figuring out a word. The tone is one of reading as a serious job which the child must work to master.

Parental Conceptions of Education and Literacy

Differences in reading behaviors and strategy use cited above suggest that there might also be differences in how parents conceive of education and literacy. It is not true that low-income parents do not value education. Several researchers have reported the high value placed upon education by many low-income families. Delgado-Gaitan (1987) reports that obtaining a better education for children is a major reason given for Hispanic immigration to the United States. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), in detailed studies of low-income families whose children succeed in school, report extraordinary sacrifices and efforts being made to support children's education--even when parental education levels were quite low. Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham (1991), in a study of low- and high-income parents, report low-income parents rating the value of education higher than did high-income parents.

Differing literacy behaviors, however, suggest that there may be significant differences in how parents who value education conceive of literacy. Goldenberg, Reese and Gallimore (1992) report that low-income Hispanic parents mainly emphasize letter naming and spelling-sound correspondences when trying to help their children. Baker et al. (1994), cited above, note that when low-income parents spend time with children, they are much more likely to emphasize explicit instruction as well as the work and practice aspects of literacy. Middle-income parents tend to use stories for entertainment, playing, and extended conversation starters. Literacy is presented and modeled as an enjoyable way to entertain one's self and to understand the world. The work of Lancy and colleagues (cited above) tends to confirm these differences in literacy perception and practice.

Baker, Serpell, and Sonnenschein (1995) note that parent-child literacy relationships are *bi-directional*. That is, children influence parents and are influenced by them. Similarly, a child who finds literacy learning a painful experience is likely to avoid books and to make the reading experience painful for the parent involved. A child who learns to enjoy reading and to see it as an entertainment is likely to ask for books, seek attention while reading, and begin to read more independently. Data reported by Baker et al. support this bi-directional explanation of differing literacy perceptions and practices.

Literacy Support in the Home Environment

There is some disagreement about the role of parental support for literacy in the home environment. Research from the 1970s and early 1980s reported by Anderson et al. (1985) identified more books, magazines, and educational literacy materials in the homes of higher-income families and the families of children who performed well in school. When some researchers have expanded the definition of literacy materials to include more functional materials like notes, bills, grocery lists and so forth, the differences between groups are reported to shrink (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Diaz, Moll & Mehan,

1986; and Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Heath (1983) reported that low-income families used literacy, but in a different fashion and for different purposes than did middle-income families. She suggests that the schools, rather than the families, need to change to accommodate to these differences and not focus merely upon middle class literacy use. More recent work (Purcell-Gates, 1994) has provided somewhat contradictory evidence, indicating a low level of print use in low-income homes with the greatest proportion being for daily routines and employing simple language at the clause and phrase level.

Interpretations of evidence for other sorts of parental literacy support also conflict. Low-income parents model less book and magazine reading and tend to take children to libraries less than do higher-income parents (Fitzgerald, Spiegel & Cunningham, 1991; Baker et al., 1994). On the other hand, low-income parents are reported sometimes to make extended use of such literacy-related behaviors as storytelling and singing, as well as making sacrifices to financially and physically support children's education (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Baker et al., 1994; Gadsden, 1995). Again, the professional debate revolves around the meaning of these differences in literacy support and the degree to which schools focus only on the sort of literacy found in middle-class homes.

Interventions in Parent-Child Interactions

Edwards (1995, p. 56) indicates that her work since the late 1980s has consistently documented the desire of low-income parents to learn more about what to do when reading to their children. Typical comments from interviews include the following:

- *I don't know what to do when I open the book. I mean I don't know what to do first, second, third, and so on.*
- *I wish somebody would tell me what to do because I am fed up with teachers saying: "Read to your child."*

Tracey (1995), citing the work of Topping (1986) and others, notes that experimental studies to teach parents strategies to help their children with reading have been largely successful to the extent that parents have learned the strategies. Some parents have learned to increase wait time before correcting children's reading errors; others have learned to offer more praise or to use more contextual prompts as opposed to only word-level prompts. Still others have learned to read storybooks to children using dramatic conventions. Evidence of transfer of learning to home practice and continued use is much more rare. Many of these earlier studies can be seen as single approaches to improved family literacy.

Several more comprehensive family literacy programs began to make their appearance during the late 1980s and early 1990s. These more comprehensive programs tend to include multiple components such as adult literacy education, parent education and support, children's literacy education, and time for parents and children to be together. Examples of such programs include multi-city efforts such as the national Even Start

programs funded by the federal government (St. Pierre, Swartz, Gamse, Murray, Decky, & Nickel, in press) and the Kenan model programs supported by the National Center for Family Literacy (Brizius & Foster, 1993; Potts & Paul, 1995) as well as several dozen state and local level programs documented by Morrow, Tracey and Maxwell (1995).

Program Results

Even Start was begun by the U.S. Department of Education in 1989, and is designed to provide literacy training for parents while assisting children in reaching their full potential as learners. The program is designed for parents of children eight years and younger, who are, themselves, over 16 years of age, not enrolled in secondary school, and weak in basic skills. Programs must provide integrated services to accomplish program goals. There is a good deal of variation in how goals are accomplished. By the summer of 1994, Even Start was serving more than 26,000 families in approximately 474 projects (McKee & Rhett, 1995). Evaluation data, thus far, indicate a positive effect on the likelihood of parents obtaining General Educational Development (GED) credentials. Other positive results are less clear. Parental literacy gains are apparent only when programs are able to retain adults in classes for a significant period of time. Parental literacy gains are not associated with children's school readiness scores or with literacy skills. No effects upon parents' attitudes or behaviors related to parenting were detected.

The National Center for Family Literacy has advocated an integrated model of family literacy instruction for nearly a decade, and has developed a system for providing training and support for instructors and program developers. Brizius and Foster (1993), and Potts and Paul (1995) describe in detail the complex integration of program components. Programs have been particularly successful in maintaining program involvement of clients for approximately 30 hours per week for six or more months leading to documented adult literacy gains and better than expected performance of program children upon entering school.

Mikulecky and Lloyd (1995) have evaluated the impact of programs in five cities upon parent-child literacy-related interactions. After approximately six months in programs (100-120 hours of parent and parent-child together time), significant gains are documented in parent-child home reading, visits to libraries, literacy materials in the home, and children's literacy activities. Children's reported reading of books and magazines increased by 60 percent to more than once a day, and the number of times children scribbled, printed, or made letters increased by 30 percent. Parent book reading with children increased by nearly 70 percent to about once a day and library trips doubled to once every two to three weeks.

The programs studied had less impact in positively influencing parental home literacy modeling and how parents read to their children. Parents did report doing more of their own school work at home, but reported no change in leisure reading patterns. Even though the programs all stressed the importance of play and conversation as integral to children's literacy growth, success in this area was mixed. On rating questions, parents made significant gains in recognizing the important role of play and conversation in

developing children's literacy and learning. At the same time, several parents volunteered information about increased use with their four-year-olds of flashcards, workbooks from grocery stores, and worksheets borrowed from older siblings. (None of these activities was suggested by programs and, indeed, ran counter to the approach taken by most instructors). The theme of "literacy as work," which is documented in the work cited earlier in this paper (i.e., Baker et al. and Lancy et al.), was also noticeable among participants in Kenan model programs even though program efforts focused upon expanded conceptions of literacy. Playing with print, scribbling, talking, and reading increased, but so too did flashcards, worksheets, and workbooks.

Morrow, Tracey and Maxwell (1995) summarize the results of several dozen family literacy programs. The reported results are consistently positive--and results range from positive attitude change to follow-up reports of children's success in school to increased parental participation in school-related events. Only a few programs were able to report on literacy gains and changes in parent-child interactions. One particularly well-documented study (Neuman & Gallagher, 1994; Neuman, 1995) examines young mothers participating in a special family literacy program. Literacy-related play settings were created in the homes of six young mothers who were coached in ways to interact with their children while using literacy related props such as several children's books as well as a toy post-office and toy grocery store.

Mothers were coached in how to orally label objects and in how to focus their child's attention. In addition, they were taught to create special learning situations for their children and ways to coach and converse with them. This procedure is described by Neuman and Gallagher (1994, p. 398) as "fine-tuning parental assistance." The researchers found significant improvement in the areas addressed by their coaching, though these gains declined during the transfer and maintenance portions of the study. They advocate this sort of coaching for parental literacy much like Lamaze coaching for pregnant women or La Leche coaching for breast feeding.

Conflicting Viewpoints

This paper earlier discussed the professional debate over the roles of parental support for children's literacy among middle- and low-income parents. A similar debate exists on the role of family literacy programs. Some researchers and family literacy program designers suggest directly addressing established aspects of parent-child literacy interactions by supplementing literacy materials in the home and directly teaching parents literacy and language strategies associated with children's literacy success. Auerbach (1995) and others term this approach a "deficit" model because it assumes family deficits which must be remediated. These researchers suggest a deficit approach may undermine existing family strengths while convincing parents they must become people they are unlikely ever to become.

These researchers recommend, instead, what they term a "wealth" model which identifies and connects literacy instruction to existing parental strengths and immediate social concerns. Auerbach (1995) suggests that parents in such programs might learn literacy

dealing with such issues as immigration, employment, housing, safety, and drugs. Other researchers (see Edwards above) report that many parents want to know how to help their children with literacy, and resent not being shown explicit strategies for reading with their children.

The issue of what to teach about parent-child interactions can become an especially difficult problem in programs where instructors are middle-income women whose ethnic and cultural backgrounds differ from those of their students. It is one thing to model ways to read a book to a child. It becomes a much larger and more complicated undertaking to suggest that a parent also change her style of dinner conversation and other parenting behaviors such as the very way she explains the world to a child. Furthermore, the concept of reading as fun may be utterly foreign to an adult who has had a decade or more of negative experiences with print and schools. It becomes very difficult to avoid transmitting the false message that the students must abandon nearly all of who they are and become as much like the instructor as possible. One of the attractions of the "wealth" model is that it manages to avoid difficulties by asserting that it is not necessary for programs to influence parent-child interactions.

On the other hand, research over the last decade indicates that parent-child interactions are very important. Theories of how language and literacy develop have been examined, tested, and refined. The relationships between a child's developing literacy and adult literacy modeling, oral explanations, and forms of reinforcement are relationships that go well beyond mere correlations. To avoid the possibility of growth in these areas rather than risk the label of "deficit" seems ill advised. This is especially true since there is evidence that programs can help learners make gains in these areas.

Results from family literacy program evaluations such as those cited earlier document the effectiveness of programs in increasing library visits, materials in the home, the incidence of parental reading to children, and children's literacy-related activity. With extensive interventions, it is even possible to influence and fine tune the manner in which parents interact with their children. Transfer beyond program walls and maintaining what has been learned have been less clearly documented, however.

The sparse, existing evidence suggests programs may require extensive efforts from highly trained instructors to change parental literacy modeling, complex language use, and conceptions of how literacy is learned. Indeed, evidence from several studies suggests simply urging parents to read to children or help with homework may lead to many imitating what is identified as poor and counter-productive teaching practice. Even so, a few long-term studies indicate a positive impact of family literacy program involvement in children's early school success. Data on the impact of pure "wealth" model programs or "empowerment" programs which build curriculum around empowering parents to deal with daily social problems are not yet generally available.

A Middle Ground

A middle ground may be possible. Powell (1995) indicates that long-term discussion groups have proven to be much more powerful tools than direct instruction approaches in changing parenting beliefs and practices. Such discussion groups are usually anchored in dealing with a specific child and specific problems. Often, learning interpersonal relationship skills, which may be new to the young parent, are central to this process. In addition, these groups start by building upon the parent's current understandings of how to parent.

Howard Miller, an Even Start Project Director, suggests that trust and timing are also part of the mix. Miller (1995) observes:

If you tell me that the way my momma raised me was wrong, I'm probably not going to listen to you. If I learn to trust you and find other things you tell me to be useful, I just might think about what you have to say about raising children.

The power is in the hands of the learner to try new ideas, not in the hands of the instructor to inculcate them.

National Center for Family Literacy model family literacy programs have opportunity for parental discussion groups and trust-building available in the *Parent-Time* component of programs. In addition, Sharon Darling of NCFL indicates that program integration can help with parent-child interactions. For example, one program schedules instruction so that parents preparing for the GED examination learn about wind and the operation of wind upon kites and airplane wings. During the same time period, as part of *Parent-Child Together Time*, parents build and fly kites with their youngsters. Parents are encouraged to share their new knowledge and explain kites. In this way, elaborated use of language and explanation occurs more naturally as parents become more capable of explaining the world. Gadsden (1995) suggests still other activities in which parents and older children can engage in joint projects such as translation of oral histories into written texts, joint study of family or community histories, and genealogical analyses. Such tasks would offer opportunity for extended language use as well as development of interpersonal skills.

Conclusion

Parent-child interactions are important to a child's developing literacy abilities. It is becoming increasingly clear that these interactions involve a good deal more than simply reading to children and providing them with books. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that simply telling a parent to read to a child may lead to quite different behaviors depending upon the background of the parent. Some of these behaviors may even be counter-productive. In addition, a growing body of research indicates that the way in which a parent speaks with a child may have as much or more to do with later reading achievement of the child than actual time spent reading to the child.

Educators disagree about what is to be done with this information. Some suggest that the information be ignored, since it implies low-income parents may in some way be

deficient. It is better to focus upon literacy instruction designed to give parents more control over their world. If this is done, all else will follow. Others point to successes in teaching literacy and parenting strategies to new parents and point out that many parents want to know how to improve the literacy of their children.

A middle ground is possible, but only if the issue of parent-child interactions is addressed with a good deal of sensitivity, tact, and respect for all concerned. Rather than directly teaching new ways for parents and children to interact with language and literacy, an interactive approach involves generating opportunities for discussion, modeling, and practice^{3/4}as well as time, energy, and talent.

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Emergent literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a child develops in relation to reading and writing throughout the early childhood period, starting at birth and before the onset of conventional reading and writing instruction (usually at school entry). Emergent literacy includes such aspects as oral language (both speaking and listening), understanding that print can carry meaning, as well as basic alphabet knowledge, and early phonological awareness. ii.