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How Parents' Perceptions of Literacy Acquisition Relate To Their Children's Emerging Literacy Knowledge

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There is increasing recognition that literacy learning is a sociocultural phenomenon and that the ways in which the learning is mediated, the meanings which are ascribed to literacy, and the literacy activities in which members of a cultural group engage are determined by the beliefs and values held by the participants (Clay, 1993). For example, in her work with three different cultural groups in the southeastern United States, Heath (1983) documented qualitative differences between the early literacy experiences of working class children and their middle class counterparts. Tracking the children's literacy development in school, she found that the middle class children whose early literacy experiences approximated the experiences which they subsequently encountered in school were successful; working class children whose preschool literacy experiences were not congruent with those at school experienced difficulty and failure and consequently dropped out of school.

Shapiro investigated relationships between home literacy environment and the early literacy knowledge of

preschoolers attending the University of British Columbia Child Study Center and who came from an upper middle class socioeconomic area of Vancouver. He found differences in the home literacy environments and differences in children's early literacy knowledge even within this homogeneous population. An earlier study of the perceptions of literacy learning held by parents of preschoolers who attend the U.B.C. Child Study Center, found that parents' beliefs fall along a continuum; while some parents held beliefs that are congruent with an emergent literacy paradigm, others held much more traditional beliefs.

Another line of research with school age children has shown that the beliefs which teachers hold about literacy learning influence how they teach literacy (Bondy, 1985; Deford, 1978) and that children subsequently develop beliefs about literacy learning which are congruent with those of their teachers (Rasinski and Deford, 1988). As well, some researchers and theorists (Fitzgerald, 1993) have argued that when there is conflict between literacy learning at home and at school, children's literacy learning may be jeopardized. And while Heath's work lends support to this position, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that the impoverished inner-city children in their study were successful in learning to read and write despite the lack of harmony between literacy learning at home and at school.

The purpose of this article is to report the findings of a study designed to investigate the relationships between the beliefs which parents hold about literacy learning and their children's early literacy knowledge and their perceptions of learning to read and to write. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions: 1) Do three and four year old children hold beliefs about learning to read and write consistent with the beliefs of their parents; and 2) Are there differences

in early literacy knowledge between children whose parents believe in a traditional readiness model of learning to read and write and children whose parents believe in an emergent literacy orientation?

Subjects

The sample consisted of 16 three and four year old children who attended the U.B.C. Child Study Center and whose parents were the subjects of the research on parents' perceptions about literacy learning referred to earlier. Eight children were from the group whose parents held views more consistent with an emergent literacy paradigm and eight were from the group whose parents held more traditional views.

Instruments

Home Literacy Environment Index (HLEI). Initially designed by Shapiro (1979) as a 16 item questionnaire "designed to elicit information regarding the literacy environment and interaction with literacy materials in the home" (Reeder and Shapiro, 1993, p. 5), the index was used as an interview guide in this study. The answers were coded using a Likert-like scale.

Parents' Perceptions of Literacy Learning Interview Schedule (PPLIS). This instrument, somewhat similar to Deford's Theoretical Orientation Profile, is a 33-item interview guide developed by the author. A review of the literature revealed a number of salient features of emergent literacy (e.g., children use inventive spelling as they begin to write) which were then reformulated into questions (e.g. "should you correct your child if she wrote *kt* for the word *cat*?) and grouped thematically into reading, writing and literacy-general. Two university professors whose expertise is in early literacy reviewed the instrument to establish face validity and content validity. The instrument was then administered to a

class of 40 senior undergraduate primary education students who had studied emergent literacy in-depth in language arts/reading methods courses. Half the students were instructed to answer as if they believed in a traditional readiness orientation while the others were asked to answer as if they subscribed to an emergent literacy view. The answers were then coded as to anticipated responses and a reliability of 95 percent was established.

Concepts of print test. This instrument was developed by Clay (1979) to assess children's concepts of print such as book orientation, directionality, concepts of letter and word, and punctuation. Twenty four questions were asked the child as a book (*Sand*) which is part of the battery was being read. Responses on each question were scored 1 or 0 according to explicit instructions on the test.

Letter identification. This instrument is part of the Clay (1979) battery. The child was asked to identify in turn 54 upper and lower case letters which were ordered randomly. The child was credited with a correct response for naming the letter, producing an appropriate sound for the letter stimulus (e.g. /b/ for *b*) or indicating a word which has the letter in the initial position in the word.

Storybook reading reenactment. This procedure was developed by Sulzby (1985). In this study, all of the children were read *Are You My Mother* (Eastman, 1960) on four occasions by their respective preschool teachers in the month prior to the study. For the enactment, the children were presented with the book and the examiner asked "Would you read this book for me please?" Story book reenactments were scored independently by two raters on an 11-point scale using a classification scheme developed by Sulzby (1985).

Writing task. This task used the prompts from Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982). Children were asked to write (print) the following words: 1) the child's name, 2) MOM, 3) DAD, 4) BEAR, and 5) DUCK. Responses on each prompt were scored independently by two raters on a 1-6 scale developed by the author. This scale in part used Chow's (1986) developmental stages and scores were assigned as follows: scribbling and drawing-1; pre-phonetic-2; semi-phonetic-3; phonetic-4; transitional-5 and conventional or mature-6.

Children's concepts of reading and writing. Each child was asked four questions: 1) [*Child's name*] Do you know how to read? 2) How do children learn how to read? 3) [*Child's name*] Do you know how to write/print? and 4) How do children learn how to write/print?

Procedure

In phase one of the study, 25 parents of three and four year old children from the U.B.C. Child Study Center were interviewed by the researcher using the HLEI and the PPLLIS. Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed and coded and it was found that while some parents held views consistent with emergent literacy, others held more traditional views. Furthermore, all of the homes provided a rich literacy environment although there was considerable variation even within this relatively homogeneous population.

In the second phase of the study, five audiotaped interviews using the instruments described earlier were conducted with each child at the Child Study Center by a graduate assistant who is a trained clinician and a doctoral candidate in educational psychology. The audiotaped interviews were then transcribed in their totality by a second graduate assistant and the data were analyzed. To triangulate these data, an attempt was made to contact the parents of each of the children and to

conduct a follow-up interview with them using the protocol in Figure 1. For various reasons, only twelve of the parents were available — seven whose perceptions were congruent with emergent literacy and five whose perceptions were more traditional.

Figure 1
Follow-up interview protocol

1. Please describe what you do as you read to and with (child's name). (If no mention is made of drawing child's attention to the text, words, letters, letter-sounds, probe to see if this occurs.)
2. Do you encourage (child's name) to read along with you?
Do you encourage child to read on his or her own?
3. Does (child's name) "pretend" read? If so, do you refer to this as reading?
4. Do you help (child's name) with writing? What do you do to help (child's name) with writing?
5. Does (child's name) try to write/print messages or scribble? Do you refer to this as writing?

Results

The results for this study are presented under two headings: children's literacy knowledge and children's perceptions of literacy.

Children's literacy knowledge. To facilitate data analysis, the children were grouped on the basis of their parents' score on the PPLLIS. The eight children whose parents' scores were above the mean were designated the Emergent Literacy Group while those whose parents' scores were below the mean were designated the Traditional Group.

Table 1
Means for age and literacy measures

	Age	Letter	Concept	Story	Writing	HLEI	PPLIIS
Emergent	4-2	16	5.25	3.9	9	60.5	31.1
Traditional	4-3	22	7.35	4.0	12.75	53	25

It is important to note here that none of the children knew how to read in the traditional sense of being able to decode print. As can be seen in Table 1, the group means were higher for the children in the traditional group on all of the measures of children's emergent literacy knowledge than they were for the emergent group although only minimally so on the story reenactment task. Although *t*-tests revealed that there are no significant differences between the groups on the various measures, the results are interesting. We would expect perhaps that children whose parents have a more traditional orientation would outperform their peers whose parents have perceptions which are more congruent with an emergent literacy perspective on letter recognition since the former group indicated that as they read to their children, they pointed out and discussed letters and letter sounds whereas the latter group indicated that they emphasized enjoyment while reading and did not draw children's attention to print. However, the opposite would be expected on the story reenactment, writing, and perhaps the concepts of print tasks since these tasks are more congruent with an emergent literacy perspective and measuring those aspects of literacy (e.g., meaning of story, writing) which the parents with an

emergent literacy perspective indicated that they attended to more so than specific skills (e.g., letter-sound relationships, letter formation). Again, though, the means favored the traditional group. It should be noted that the children in the traditional group were on average one month older than the children in the emergent literacy group and age could be a confounding variable with measures such as these.

Of course, whether these differences are of educational significance remains to be seen. For example, despite the fact that the research suggests that knowledge of letters is "the best predictor of beginning reading achievement" (Adams, 1991, p. 55), this might not be so for children at this age. Perhaps it is more important that meaning and enjoyment be the goals of reading for children at this stage so that they will have developed schemata of reading and writing which will allow them to make sense of formal instruction in the more mechanistic aspects upon school entry.

Several of the parents in the emergent literacy group expressed such a position by indicating that the emphasis should be on meaning and enjoyment when they read to their children and that they "do not dwell on words and letters," as one of these parents stated. In fact, some of the parents appeared to believe that attending to print during book reading would be detrimental to the child's literacy development. However, Pellegrini (1991) maintains that "...in the course of reading books, mainstream-culture mothers draw children's attention to grapheme-phoneme relations" (p. 382) and indeed the parents in the traditional group confirm that they did this. Whether this difference in book reading between the groups made a difference in terms of the children's current literacy knowledge and subsequent literacy development remains open to speculation.

Figure 2*Question 1: "(Child's name), do you know how to read?"***Emergent Literacy Group:**

- M: "No."
 K: "No."
 N: "No."
 I: "No."
 H: "No."
 Q: "No."
 C: "No, but I know how to read this book."
 E: "Yes."

Traditional Group

- T: "No."
 L: "No."
 A: "Not really. Not the days but only one book."
 G: "Not lots of books. I just know how to read some."
 R: "Only that book. And I can read to Jessie and to you but not to anyone else."
 F: "Yes, I know how to read Brian's books. They're really tiny."
 Y: "Yes."
 B: "Yes."

Pearson product moment correlations were computed between the PLLIS and the other measures excluding the Children's Concepts of Reading and Writing, (The data from this instrument are treated descriptively.) As can be seen in Table 2, only very weak relationships existed between parents' perceptions and the measures of the children's literacy knowledge. On the other hand, there was a strong relationship between parents' perceptions and the home literacy environment. Working with three, four and five year olds, Shapiro (1993) found moderate relationships between home literacy environment and other literacy measures. However,

he found much stronger relationships between home literacy environment and the other measures with the five year olds. Thus, the findings from this study are congruent with those of Shapiro.

Table 2
Correlations between parents' perceptions and measures of children's literacy knowledge

	Letter	Concepts	Story	Writing	HLEI
Parent's perceptions	.21	.13	.08	.16	.82

Children's perceptions of literacy. In this section, children's perceptions of literacy are examined. Again, the children were assigned to the emergent literacy group and the traditional group on the basis of their parents' score on the PPLLIS. The responses of the children were then analyzed by grouping them into themes. These were then grouped by an independent rater and an inter-rater reliability of 86 percent was achieved. It should be noted that prior to interviewing the children, it was decided not to probe the children's answers since to do so might lead children into providing responses which they believed the research assistant wanted to hear. Consequently, the children's responses are not elaborated, though a probing interview might have provided valuable insights into the children's perceptions of learning to read and write.

Question 1 (*Do you know how to read?*) was designed to elicit children's perceptions of themselves as readers. That only one child in the emergent literacy group (E) answered this question affirmatively while six of the children (M, K, N, I, H, and O) responded with an unqualified "no" was

unanticipated, for a key assumption underlying emergent literacy is that children's initial attempts at reading — which all of these children were able to engage in to varying degrees in the story reenactment task — are legitimate in their own right (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Intuitively one would expect that these parents whose views about learning to read reflected an emergent literacy orientation would be helping children develop the perception that their early attempts were real reading. On the other hand in the traditional group, only two of the children (T and L) contended that they could not read while the other children saw themselves as readers or as having some ability in this regard. Note "G's" response: "Not lots of books. I just know how to read some." Again, intuitively, one would expect that parents who hold more traditional beliefs would be helping children develop the perception that reading means being able to identify the words on a page and that reading-like behavior (Holdaway, 1979), is not really reading. However, this appeared not to be the case for in the follow-up interviews, all of the parents in both groups indicated that their children engaged in reading-like behavior (Figure 1, Question 2) — of which storybook reenactment would be an example — and all of the parents agreed that they would refer to such "pretend" reading as reading.

There appear to be two viable explanations for this finding. Given the strong correlation between parents' perceptions and home literacy environment reported earlier, we can conclude that the children in the emergent literacy group have experienced a richer literacy environment than the children in the traditional group. Therefore, because of this increased exposure to reading, the children in the emergent group might have a broader view of reading than being able to read particular words or particular books and recognize that they are unable to do this. This finding might also be attributable to the fact that six of the parents of children in the emergent literacy group indicated that they did not draw

attention to words, letters, or letter sounds while reading (Figure 1, Question 1), but instead emphasized meaning and enjoyment in the shared reading.

Figure 3

Question 2: "How do children learn how to read?"

Emergent Literacy Group

- M: "I don't know. (Inaudible) big child's. By learning — I don't know what they do."
 O: "I don't know. Grownups know how to read."
 E: "They read books. They read writing and they read Valentines."
 N: "By practicing. I'm looking at books and by my Mommy and daddy. Their mommy and daddy reading books to them."
 H: "People teach them. They can read them stories. They can help each other. They can read a book again."
 K: "T-I-S-N-P-C-W. We read a book *Cat in the Hat*."
 C: "My brother was teaching me. [He] tells me."
 I: "They just try to spell something and it's a word and maybe if they try they can spell *hat* or *bat* or *milk*. They learn their letters. They go to school and they learn to sing songs."

Traditional Group

- A: "Oh I know how to spell *arm*, *cat* and *dog*. I know how to spell my sister's and mom's and dad's and my nanny's names... I don't know... Maybe [they] listen to [their] mother reading a book and [they] remembered the words."
 T: "They got so smart. He got some books from school and he knows what they spell."
 F: "They learn at school."
 L: "I don't know — just at school (inaudible) just with my teacher (inaudible) reads a book."
 R: "Because they can watch their mothers how they do it. They can even learn without their mothers sometimes. They think how you do it."
 G: "They just read — keep reading until they learn how to read the right words. They're just reading wrong words and they're reading some of the right words, more right words, more right, and finally they learn to read all the right words."
 Y: "By writing. I learned to read by writing my name."
 B: "A-B-C. They go home and watch the video & learn their A-B-C."

In addition, three of these parents indicated that they did not encourage their children to join in the reading. On the other hand, three of the five parents of children in the traditional group indicated that they usually drew children's attention to words, letters and letter sounds as they read and the other two parents indicated that they sometimes did so. Three of these parents also reported that they had their children practice letter identification and symbol-sound relationships on computer programs. As well, all five of these parents indicated that they encouraged their children to join in as they read.

Thus, the tendency of these children to see themselves as readers could be attributable to the mediation of print by the parents in combination with the encouragement to join in the reading, whereas the relative lack of mediation of print and less emphasis on overt participation by the parents of the children in the emergent group could account for the fact that fewer of these children saw themselves as readers.

The second question was designed to ascertain what children perceive about learning to read. The perceptions of the children were generally congruent with those of their parents. As can be seen in Figure 3, reading books was identified by four of the children (E, N, H, and K) in the emergent literacy group as the means by which children learn to read. As well, three children (N, H, and C) recognized the role of a significant other. The research in emergent literacy has demonstrated that being read to by a significant other plays an important role in children's early literacy development. These children, whose parents subscribe to this model of learning to read and who actualize this model through the experiences they provide for their children, appeared to be developing perceptions congruent with those of their parents. Only one

child (I) from the emergent group suggested that learning to read entails learning letters and spelling.

Figure 4

Question 3: "(Child's Name), do you know how to write?"

Emergent Literacy Group

- E. "Yes."
 K. "Yes."
 N: "Yes."
 I: "Yes."
 C: "Yes."
 M: "No. I know how to write my own name."
 H: "No."
 O: "No."

Traditional Group

- Y: "Yes."
 B: "Yes."
 G: "I know how to write some words."
 R: "I can write a bit."
 F: "Only some words. I can write *J*, I can write *fox*."
 A: "Well, I tried to copy a love card I was giving to my friend but I couldn't copy it. (Inaudible) so hard. I know how to write my name."
 L: "No."
 T: "No."

Of course, learning letters and spelling are regarded as important within an emergent literacy model. However, the primacy which this child afforded this knowledge seems to suggest a more traditional perception of reading on her part. Children in the traditional group were developing perceptions of reading which reflected a more traditional orientation. For example, only two children (A and T) mentioned the importance of books and both referred to spelling at the same time, perhaps indicating the centrality which they

ascribed to this skill in learning to read. In contrast to the emergent group, only one child (R) in the traditional group talked about the role of a significant other. G's response is quite interesting and can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand it could suggest the perception that learning to read involves much practice and successive approximations toward exactitude — a basic tenet of emergent literacy; on the other hand it could reflect the belief that learning to read means learning to memorize words and that one becomes a reader when one gets the words right. Two of the children in this group (F and L) saw learning to read as a school based phenomenon and again this reflects a traditional orientation where children became ready to read prior to schooling and then learned to read in school (Teale and Sulzby, 1986).

As can be seen in Figure 4, the third question was designed to ascertain whether children saw themselves as writers. While most of the children in the emergent literacy group did not perceive themselves as readers, the opposite was true for writing in that five of the children responded with an unequivocal *yes* to this question. Children's early attempts at writing are valued and seen as important steps in a child's literacy development from an emergent literacy perspective. And indeed, it appears that most parents in this group were helping children develop a perception of themselves as writers as we would expect. The two children who said that they could not write were also two of the children who had indicated that they did not know how to read. Within the traditional group, only two (Y and B) of the children answered with an unequivocal "yes" in response to this question. Four of the children (G, R, F, and A) indicated that they could write specific items (e.g., "I can write some words"). It is worth noting that three of these children (A, G, and R) had very similar perceptions of themselves as readers. As well, two of the children indicated that they did not know

how to write. Again, it appears that the children in this group were developing more traditional perceptions of writing. It is interesting that the two children in this group who saw themselves as writers also saw themselves as readers. And all of the parents except one from the traditional group indicated that their children engaged in scribbling notes, lists, captions and so forth. And all of the parents except one from the traditional group whose children engaged in scribbling indicated that they referred to these early attempts at writing. However, despite parents' overt acknowledgment of the role of scribbling in learning to write, the children in the traditional group appeared not to have internalized this perception to the same extent as did the children in the emergent group although the mean scores on the writing tasks (Table 1) were higher for the former group than for the latter.

Question 4 was designed to elicit children's perceptions of how children learn to write. Six of the children (M, E, N, I, K and O) in the emergent literacy group mentioned the role of a significant other in learning to write (e.g., M: "By telling their mommy 'how do I write?' She tells me how to write my own name"). Again, this recognition of the role of the significant other was highlighted by this group of children in response to a similar question about reading. O's mention of puzzles is quite interesting. Unfortunately, a portion of his response is inaudible on the audiotape and it was not possible to determine if he was comparing learning to write with solving a puzzle or whether he had simply changed the topic and was referring to some other type of puzzle. Three of the children (K, C, and H) alluded to learning how to print letters as opposed to words or books which reflects a traditional view of learning to write. None of these three children mentioned such sub-skills in relation to reading although K did respond to question 2 (Figure 3) by reciting a number of letters.

Figure 5

Question 4: "How do children learn how to write?"

Emergent Literacy Group

- M: "By telling their mommy 'How do I write?' She tells me how to write my own name."
- E: "They write books. They write books at school. (Inaudible) write a picture and paint. I saw my dad write books."
- N: "My mommy teach me how to write my name. And when I've done my picture like painting, I put my name down on it at the end. And my sister taught me how to write *rain*."
- I: "Well, they just write something. Maybe their mother could write something and they could spell it... I just kept practicing and did it."
- O: "Grownups need to help children... help them with puzzles."
- K: "You do one tiny little circle. My brother showed me."
- C: "My dad has a computer. I can draw a *P*. I just knowed."
- H: "I don't know. I can color. My brother already knows. You need to have a pencil and write some letters."

Traditional Group

- R: "They copy how their mother does. They learn by themselves sometimes. They copy their dads and their mothers. They copy them writing."
- Y: "A long time ago I learned how to write *apple*. By practicing. They go to school."
- F: "At school. Cause they try to write. Then they keep writing, keep going to school, keep going to school — then they learn."
- T: "I don't know. I know how to print."
- B: "They learn how to write *B* for *Brian* and *A* for *apple* and *N* for *pen*."
- L: "Trace the *W* on my name. I don't know. Maybe they just play Leggo. Tracing."
- A: "I know how to write my name... Well, maybe there's special something that you learn without teaching. A miracle. Maybe the books tell them how to write."
- G: "They write wrong words and then the right words all the time. Finally they learn to write the right word. They circle wrong words and then they keep on trying and finally they learn how to do the right words."

Only one child referred to the role of a significant other in the traditional group where most of the responses tended to reflect traditional perceptions. For example, two of the children (F and Y) saw learning to write as a school based task. Likewise, B and L referred to letters and tracing letters. And as was the case in the parallel question on reading, one can interpret G's response either as an insightful analysis of the emerging nature of young children's writing or as a belief that learning to write simply means learning to spell correctly. Likewise, it is difficult to categorize A's response, although she seemed to be alluding to the fact that children learn about writing from books, which of course would be congruent with emergent literacy.

Conclusion

Given the homogeneous nature of the sample in this study and the fact that the participants were not randomly selected, caution should be used in interpreting the results. And of course, because of these limitations, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, certain trends were apparent which could conceivably be more pronounced were a more diverse sample involved.

The results of this study suggest that there is a relationship between parents' perceptions of literacy learning and the perceptions of literacy learning which their children were developing. However, with this group, there was an extremely weak relationship between parents' perceptions of literacy learning and their children's emerging literacy knowledge. And there were no statistically significant differences between the measures of early literacy knowledge of children whose parents subscribed to an emergent literacy view and children whose parents held more traditional views of learning to read and to write.

Several researchers (Bondy, 1985; Rasinski and Deford, 1988) have suggested that school-age children develop perceptions about literacy consistent with that which is mediated to them through the instruction of their teachers. The findings here suggested that children were developing perceptions of literacy consistent with those of their parents before they began literacy programs in school. Whether they maintain these perceptions after they enter school or indeed adopt perceptions of literacy as a result of instruction, as suggested by the research cited, needs further investigation.

Finally, it is often implied in the research (Bondy, 1985; Church and Newman, 1985) that literacy learning is imperiled for children who develop narrow, traditional perceptions of reading. Interestingly, the opposite appeared to be the case here. Further research with a more diverse population is needed as is longitudinal research which would follow children from preschool into the primary grades.

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