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Family Literacy: The Missing Link to School-Wide Literacy Efforts

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Abstract

Everyone has a literacy component to their lives. Family literacy refers to the ways people learn and use literacy in their home and everyday lives. Many times there is a disconnect between family and school literacies. Schools do not have systematic ways of tapping into the wealth of knowledge families possess and linking that knowledge to school literacy efforts. This article provides a brief review of family literacy issues and perspectives. Sample family literacy programs are summarized and suggestions are given for strengthening the link between family and school through food, photos, family publications, journals, literacy events, and using parents as resources in the classroom.

Literacy begins at home. Literacy is everywhere and is shaped and re-shaped by the spaces we enter and exit (Roswell, 2006) and by the interactions we have with people in those spaces. For some children there is a cultural divide between home and school that has particular implications for the development of literacy for those whose home practices are not sanctioned in school. There is a need to create a permanent space for family literacy in the school.

The story of family literacy is a story of people and how they use literacy to achieve their goals in their family, life, work, and community. It is my story who, although I had an illiterate grandmother, developed a passion for learning and literacy. One of the family literacy experiences I had while growing up in Greece involved monthly afternoons at the movies with my grandmother and her best friend.

Once a month, on a Thursday afternoon, I would find myself riding the public bus into the city along with two illiterate older ladies who enjoyed watching Turkish soap operas (I don't think I was ever given a choice in the matter). My grandmother would wait for me to come home from school, get a snack, walk to her best friend's house to pick her up, and then the three of us would walk to the local bus stop. Those two ladies would chat about life, their families, the neighborhood, medications they were taking, and any upcoming events or religious celebrations.

What was my role in this whole scenario? I was the involuntary reader. I would sit in between my grandmother and her friend at the movie theatre and for two hours or so I would read the subtitles out loud for them. I vividly remember people in the movie theatre reminding me to be quiet but my grandmother would encourage me to ignore them and keep on reading. After two hours of watching *Houlia* (one of the famous actresses in that genre of entertainment), reading subtitles non-stop, and having to deal with people yelling at me, we would finally catch the bus and return home. Of course, I was never rewarded for my services. "No amount of money can buy one's ability to read!" my grandmother would often remind me. I dreaded those Thursday afternoons but I loved my grandmother! At the time, I disliked the whole humiliating movie experience but treasure the memories now. I guess practicing reading in a public theatre did not scar me for life; I could even say that it helped my reading fluency.

In short, my tale presents a snapshot one of the diverse ways in which literacy happens at home. How could my unconventional experiences with an illiterate grandmother have been relevant to my literacy development? I believe that the interactions I had with my grandmother while she, her best friend, and I were constructing meaning from the movie were invaluable. Literacy development is not just about scoring well on a literacy test; it is also about the relationships that take place inside and outside school. It is not the availability of books, the frequency of book reading, or the rich discussions that might

follow reading alone that are related to children's literacy and language development, but the broader pattern of parent-child activities and interactions inside and outside the home that supports children's literacy achievement (Strickland, as cited in Roswell, 2006). My illiterate grandmother took time to talk with me, sing to me, go shopping with me, teach me how to cook and crochet, and tell me tales about her homeland. She was a great storyteller, was very involved in her grandchildren's education, was an advocate for reading and learning, a volunteer, and a social activist. When my mother could not attend a parent-teacher conference, my grandmother would take her place. I vividly remember her discussing my brothers' progress as well as mine, with teachers. Although she was illiterate, she still wanted the best for her grandchildren. She encouraged us to learn and succeed and did whatever she could to support our learning. I have come to appreciate the invaluable (and somewhat unconventional) literacy experiences she offered to me.

What is Family Literacy?

Throughout history, the family has been the beginning point for the development of human resources within a culture and the primary source for learning. Families help children construct meaning about life, culture, language, learning, and literacy. Families provide an intergenerational transfer of language, culture, thought, values, and attitudes throughout the formative years of their children's lives.

The term, "family literacy," was coined by Denny Taylor (1993) to describe how literacy was used in families. Family is defined as two or more people (i.e., parents, grandparents, caregivers, siblings, and extended family) who share a common lineage (or create a new one), share common goals and values, have commitments to one another and reside, usually, in the same dwelling. Family literacy refers to the members' ability to read, write, communicate, view, and take the perspective of another. As part of family literacy, family members learn together how to become literate, increase literacy and use the power of literacy and family communication to change their lives and to meet their goals.

Family literacy describes a wide range of activities from a parent reading a book to a child to a formal program with many services for adults and children. Historically, family literacy is an "umbrella term" often used to describe a wide range of programs involving family members and literacy activities. The programs vary in intensity, activities, and duration (Come & Fredericks, 1995; National

Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), 2007). Family literacy is a proven intergenerational approach that improves the literacy, language and life skills of both parents and children. There are numerous local family programs throughout the country that provide parents with education and skills that increase children's literacy and educational development (e.g., NCFL, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Family literacy requires that parents are viewed and supported as the first teachers of their children. The Family Literacy Commission views family literacy as the ways parents, caregivers, children, and extended family members use literacy at home in their community. Parents are critical partners in the education of all children.

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL, 1994; 2007) has compiled many statistics that highlight the importance of family literacy in the United States. For example:

- Every 40 seconds a child is born into poverty and every 37 seconds a child is born to a mother who did not graduate from high school.
- 71% of children whose mothers completed college attended early childhood centers in 1996, compared to 37% whose mothers had less than a high school education.
- The more types of reading materials there are in the home, the higher the level of student proficiency.
- Parental literacy is one of the single most important indicators of a child's success.
- By age four, children who live in poor families will have heard 32 *million* fewer words than children living in professional families.
- One in five, or 20%, of America's children five years old and under live in poverty.
- More schools with poverty populations and minority enrollments of 50% or more perceived the following issues to be barriers than schools low in these characteristics:
 - Lack of parent education to help with homework;
 - Cultural or socioeconomic differences;

- Language differences between parents and staff;
 - Parent attitudes about the school;
 - Staff attitudes about the parents; and
 - Concerns about safety in the area after school hours.
- Parents in family literacy programs reported more educationally supportive home environments.

There is much research to support the importance of parental involvement in children's education (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Johnson, & Van Voorhis (2002); Henderson & Berla, 1994). Researchers in adult literacy and literacy within K-12 schools recognize the role of the family as central to children's attitudes toward school and learning. The National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA) (2007), reported that 30 years of research has documented the positive connection between parent involvement and student success and the potential of parent involvement to be the most transformational type of educational reform. Children whose parents are involved in their schools by attending school events, back-to-school nights, or volunteering are more likely to do well in school, and to exhibit fewer problems than children whose parents are not involved. Children of adults who participate in literacy programs have improved grades, test scores, reading skills, and are less likely to drop out of school. Parent involvement in their children's schooling influences student achievement, attendance, self-concept, motivation, and behavior. Poor parents, despite poor education or bad school experiences, are still capable of supporting their children's development through innate literacy activities. However, many parents may be unable to assist their children in ways that support the school's program and expectations (Taylor, 1993).

Research supports a strong link between the home environment and children's acquisition of school-based literacy. Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Scher, Fernandez-Fein, Munsterman, Hill, Goddard-Truitt, and Danseco (1996) found that parents' perspectives on literacy related to the experiences they made available to their children at home and to the way children responded to literacy experiences at school. Brody, Stoneman, and McCoy (1996) found that children whose parents demonstrated responsive behavior during literacy interactions enjoyed and were more actively involved in literacy activities in the classroom.

Since family literacy plays such a focal role in children's literacy development, what types of family literacy efforts should we be having in our schools?

In what ways can we systematically get to know parents and families and involve them in the learning of their children? Parents need to feel empowered by becoming active participants in the development of their child's literacy (Rasinski, 1989). Parents, teachers, schools, and communities together can provide the cultural, linguistic, and academic support children need to succeed. Parents can be instrumental in helping educators understand the complexity of family and cultural diversity of their children. Helping families engage in literacy activities strengthens and improves the literacy skills of all family members.

Family Literacy and School-Wide Literacy Efforts

The concept of family literacy is as simple as schools and families working together for the best education of children. Schools need to develop and implement a welcoming and supportive climate for all families and children. Families need to be viewed as the primary stakeholders in school improvement and quality and should be involved in the process. The difficulty lies in finding what those notions of literacy are and how they are embedded in families' and educators' contexts (Gadsden, 2000).

Parents need to feel wanted in their children's school (Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, & Nagel, 1995). Many parents feel that they do not have the skills needed to help their children with homework or school-related matters. Some parents do not know the language, others have had negative experiences with schools, and many do not understand the school culture and structure. Schools and teachers need to re-evaluate how they work with families to foster student learning. Family literacy needs to be viewed as a central focus of any school improvement and school-wide literacy plan. As educators, we must make room for family involvement in our classrooms and schools a priority. How can our school-wide literacy plans, investment of resources, time, and funds succeed if we continue to neglect family literacy? Literacy providers need to listen critically to families' concerns, and schools need to establish strong and effective networks with community agencies and make that information available to families.

There are many ways for schools to promote partnerships with parents and the community to encourage family literacy. For example:

- Introduce quality storybooks to parents at kindergarten orientation and parent conferences and explain to parents the benefits of regular reading to a child's literacy development.

- Make school libraries and classroom libraries accessible to children, parents, and caregivers and give parents instruction on how to use the libraries and the basics of reading aloud.
- Integrate family literacy into the curriculum and invite parents to share information, ideas, and backgrounds about classroom topics or projects. Also invite parents to become resources in the classroom to support instruction.
- Communicate regularly with parents using weekly newsletters and phone calls to introduce yourself, report student progress, or discuss problems. Personal notes to invite *all* parents to school for class events will go a long way to involve parents.
- Hold parent conferences during day and evening hours to accommodate parent schedules. Parent conferences may also be moved to a place closer to the homes of parents and students to encourage participation.
- Recruit high school, college, and community volunteers to read to children during parent meetings to increase parent attendance.
- Conduct ongoing evaluations to assess the value of family literacy efforts.

It is imperative that schools utilize similar programs to forge relationships between families and school in order to support children's literacy development.

Programs for Tapping into Family Literacies

For school-wide literacy efforts to succeed, teachers must tap into families' literacy and cultural knowledge. Students learn best when the learning is meaningful and relevant to them. Teachers need to understand the numerous literacy environments their students come from and use this knowledge to foster strong family-school connections. Creating positive and culturally-sensitive family literacy programs can help increase parental involvement and children's and families' literacy skills, improve relationships between home and school, and contribute to children's success in school. As educators, we need to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge families offer in terms of language, multiple

approaches to literacy, and ability to deal with life events. Effective family literacy programs reflect and respect cultural diversity and do not operate from a deficit model for disadvantaged parents (Taylor, 1993); such programs value and appreciate parents' knowledge and instincts as a foundation for further skills development. Using food, pictures, family publications, journals, literacy nights, and parents as resources are some possible ways for tapping into families' knowledge and literacy practices.

Food, Families, and Literacy: Many educators have developed programs that involve food to bridge parents, cultures, and school and in turn help develop better cultural understanding and increased communication between parents and teachers and also among families (Griswold and Ullman, 1997). Many parents are more adept at cooking than reading and would rather share this skill with the classroom. Cooking provides students with opportunities to learn reading skills and math and science concepts such as measurement and temperature, as well as helps students become culturally aware and provides teachers with an opportunity to learn about a student's background.

Family Photographs: Spielman (2000) developed the Family Photography Project in her efforts to collect evidence about family learning, experiences, and practices. She collected numerous photographs from nine multicultural families. The photos pictured the following: parents and their children learning together at home, household routines, children's learning moments, learning environments at home and outside the home, and photographs reflecting parental values. Spielman categorized the photographs into the following categories: family, friendship, and love; growing up to become courageous and independent; culture: religion, ritual, and play; literacy; technology; responsibility and daily routine; and, the science of learning outside the community. The photos became a resource for teachers. This project provided teachers with the support they needed to better understand their students' family history and life and to become students of their students (Nieto, as cited in Spielman, 2000).

Creating a Print-Rich Environment through School-Family Publications: Teachers can develop a print-rich classroom environment by asking parents to create publications that would help others learn more about their culture. Families can include books, photos, recipe collections, autobiographies, and family histories. These publications could be turned into "news of the week." Barillas (2001) brought parents' voices into her classroom through interactive written homework assignments. This approach created a positive, collaborative

environment for parents and teachers, and it invited parents to share, in their native language, how they supported their child's learning development. Parents and children were involved in meaningful literacy activities using topics such as giving helpful advice to each other about life and responses to the 1990 Nobel Prize acceptance speech of the Dalai Lama, as part of a multicultural unit. She gave parents and students directions about different ways to complete the assignments and requested their permission to publish their writings in a classroom publication. An author's reception at the end of each quarter allowed parents, family members, students, teachers, and administrators to enjoy the writings, appreciate one another's culture and language, and celebrate literacy together. Janes and Kermani (2001) conducted a three-year Family Literacy Tutorial Program that helped parents learn how to read storybooks. Parents wrote and illustrated the stories collaboratively, and both parents and children enjoyed reading. Programs like these tap into how families with rich cultural backgrounds and knowledge constructed and shared literacy in different ways.

Home-School Journals: Morningstar (1999) created home response journals as a way to include parents as true partners in their kindergarten children's education. Through the home response journals, parents, teachers, and children experienced positive literacy practices, parents gained a better understanding of their child's literacy development, and strong, genuine partnerships were established between the teacher and parents. She exchanged journal entries with 13 families about their child's literacy activities. The journals allowed parents to raise questions about their child's literacy development, the school curricula and classroom activities, and provided a vehicle for teachers and parents to inform each other about their personal literacy beliefs. The journals allowed parents to write about their own literacy practices at home, observations, and activities. Both parents and teachers focused on understanding the whole child through his/her literacy activities and experiences at home and school. Parents and teachers also worked together to assess the child's literacy development. Such efforts allowed the teacher to use the parental feedback for curriculum planning, provided the teacher with valuable information about parents' beliefs about their child's literacy development, and helped create a shared accountability between family and school.

Family Literacy Night: Having a family literacy night is a great way for schools and teachers to promote family literacy and family involvement. Begin the night by having a storyteller share folktales and fairytales with families which

starts the event on a great note. In some schools students from each grade can participate by presenting to parents different literacy and reading techniques (e.g., games like vocabulary bingo, musical chairs with phonics, computer games, and comprehension games). Other schools concentrate their focus on parents spending time learning new strategies for teaching reading, then spend time reading a book or playing a motivational literacy game with their child.

Come and Fredericks (1995) developed The Parents That Read Succeed program to increase students' reading achievement, improve both parents' and students' attitudes toward reading, increase parental involvement in school, increase the amount of quality time parents spend with their children, foster home-school connections, and help create lifelong readers. This program encouraged parental involvement, created a forum for parents to express their ideas and questions, and offered realistic activities that contributed to the literacy experiences of children and parents. Come and Fredericks (1995) attributed the program's success to the involvement of parents in the planning. Parents and teachers advertised this program to the community and were committed to the project's success. Parents received information on the benefits of reading aloud, how to select a book, how to have fun conversations about a book with their child, how to make books with their children at home, and how to read with expression and inflection to attract and maintain a child's attention to a book. At the end of the program, parents received certificates for their participation and were given information about summer reading programs.

Parents in the Classroom: Teachers need to provide more reading opportunities for children from low-literacy homes by enlisting an aide or parent volunteer to read to children. Teachers can invite parents to support instruction by becoming teaching partners in the classroom. With appropriate training, parents can tutor individual students, stimulate oral language about different topics, read aloud to children, provide writing support, or provide after-school support. Parents can also be invited to become resources in the classroom; for example, parents can share personal experiences and events that relate to curricula objectives (i.e., cultural information, celebrations, etc.). Teachers need to clearly explain to parents what their children are studying and what the teacher expects the parents to do in support of their children's learning and success (For a list of sample parent resources, see Figure 1).

Reading Rockets

<http://www.readingrockets.org/>

This site contains resources and activities for parents and children.

PBS' Stories

<http://pbskids.org/lions/stories.html>

This site contains online stories which students can read.

Baltimore City Public School Library's Parent and Child Care Information Center

<http://www.bcplonline.org/info/parenting/index.html>

This site offers resources on children and reading, quality child care, great parenting sites, educational resources, and many other resources.

Learning to Read

<http://www.succeedtoread.com/learntoread.html>

Parents lay a foundation for success in reading by talking to their child, reading books, and playing auditory games. This site provides information on learning to read and reading to learn.

Scholastic and Families

<http://place.scholastic.com/families/>

This site is dedicated to giving parents resources to encourage the love of learning.

Read Aloud Resources

<http://www.read2kids.org/readaloud.html>

Reading aloud to your child is the single most important activity for building knowledge required for success in reading. This site contains read aloud resources for parents.

Figure 1. Parent Resources

Concluding Thoughts

Investing in family literacy can help bring about positive results in school-wide literacy efforts. Educators need to develop their knowledge of cultures and schools need to develop specific plans for family and community involvement in school. We need to not only learn about families but also create family

literacy programs that involve parents in communicating, volunteering, supporting children's learning at home, decision making, and also collaborating with the community (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Johnson, & Van Voorhis, 2002). Let us embrace family literacy and view it as a mediator for children's literacy development instead of an obstacle. We need to better understand the richness and diversity of knowledge of the family unit and channel them in our school-wide literacy efforts and learn how to interact with diverse families (Cadsden, 1999). It is very important that we begin to acknowledge "multiple literacies" (Morrow & Neuman, 1995, p. 550) found in the social practices of culturally diverse families. Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) reminded us that to effectively bring families and schools together we must not try "to impose our vision of literacy but to develop relationships with families where we can learn about what really existed in their families and connect that with the literacy classroom environment" (p. 94).

I am not a grandmother yet, but when I become one, I might just take my grandchildren to a foreign movie and ask them to read the subtitles for me...Who knows? They might even enjoy it and appreciate it later on.

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