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It's Time to Foreground the Relational Aspects of Literacy Learning

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Abstract

This article describes how young children's early relationships with caregivers and other significant adults, such as teachers, do far more than introduce and mediate their literacy experiences. These relationships *are* the experience, and only with time and development do young children differentiate from these experiences the signs and symbols as objects for exploration in their own right. To understand the literacy development of children, birth to five, one must understand the role children's relationships play in this development. To support this argument, the authors cross disciplines and include theories within literacy and developmental psychology. First, they describe theories related to the role others play in children's general development. They then review studies which examined how these relationships influence children's literacy development; next they examine the prominence of children's relationships with others in current literacy documents. Finally, this article concludes with suggestions to forefront the relational dimension of literacy learning.

Emergent literacy, "...includes the skills, knowledge, and attitudes ...presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional reading and writing" (Lonigan, 2004, p. 59). What do these precursors look like when referring to our youngest learners, birth to age five? Assumptions guided by socio-cultural perspectives

of learning suggest that these learners begin their literate lives in the laps and by the sides of significant others. Although these early interactions may not initially resemble in form or function later formal literacy learning, socio-cultural theories suggest these earliest interactions are, in fact, the foundation for the infant's later school-based literacy knowledge (Wells, 1999).

In this article we argue that the relationships formed via these early interactions are more than vehicles for transmitting literacy knowledge. These first relationships *are* the experience, and only with time and development does the child begin to differentiate from these experiences the signs and symbols as objects for exploration in their own right. What later might be described as precursors of literacy learning, e.g., use of literate language or knowledge of print concepts, are initially embedded within behaviors that, at the time, are not readily recognized as literacy (Sparling, 2004). Therefore, to understand the emergent literacy development of children, birth to age five, one must understand the significant role young children's relationships with others (first primary caregivers and later important others such as teachers) play in this development. To support this argument, we cross disciplines and extend theoretical boundaries to include those within literacy as well as developmental psychology. First, we briefly describe how socio-cultural theory and attachment theory support the significant role others play in children's general development. Then, we review studies which examine how the qualities of these relationships influence children's literacy development. Next, we examine the prominence of children's relationships with others in current literacy position statements and study group reports. We end with suggestions to assist literacy educators to forefront the relational dimension of literacy learning.

The Primacy of Personal Relationships in Literacy Development: Initially and Thereafter, A Socio-cultural Process

The infants' window on the world is first opened by others. From birth, children are focused on these others, first their family and later other adults, such as teachers, with whom they consistently interact (Schaeffer, 1996). From their earliest days, the infants' actions are theorized to be motivated by an innate need to survive. To encourage this first relationship, infants are equipped at birth with a number of social cues, such as crying, staring, and within weeks, smiling. First initiated by caregivers, and then by the infant, interactions between infants and their caregivers

become increasingly complex (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). Initially the interactions are dyadic, occurring between the infant and the caregiver. Observing these interactions, one notices the infant and caregiver not only taking turns in these face-to-face exchanges, but also sharing emotional states. Later, the interactions become triadic, and involve the infant, the caregiver, and their mutual and shared attention to an object selected by the caregiver (Adamson, Bakeman, & Deckner, 2005; Tomasello, et al., 2005). At this time, this shared engagement involves the young child and the adult sharing a goal. For example, the infant and the adult may roll a small car back and forth between them, thereby sharing the goal of moving the car back and forth. Triadic engagement is followed by collaborative engagement when the shared goal of the infant and the adult, desiring to move the car back and forth, involves not only shared attention but shared intention. Changes in the adult-infant interactions are now evident. The infant can now be observed directing the adult to perform an act, (pointing to the car or directing the adult to pick it up) and then coordinating actions with the adult to accomplish a shared intention (rolling the car down a wooden incline). From a sociocultural perspective, with the routinized exposure to such objects and actions, the infant comes to appropriate the values of the home culture (Rakoczy, Tomasello, & Striano, 2005).

For some children, early interactions involve books. For others, interactions might involve objects which represent other family interests and values. For example, a photographer may introduce a camera to her son, a mechanic may introduce a miniature car to his daughter, or a baseball fan might introduce her son to a stuffed baseball. The possibilities are infinite and affected by numerous influences, such as cultural views, family history, geography, economics, etc. (Wells, 1999). Rochat and Callaghan (2005) describe the infant's interest in such objects as stimulated by the basic need of all humans to affiliate with other humans, a need they reference as basic affiliated need (BAN). The infant seeks to maintain interactions with the caregiver and is inherently motivated to participate with attachment figures. Central to maintaining these interactions is the infant's propensity to reproduce the actions of others. At first the infant's reproduction is guided by a desire to experience the consequence of the action, whereas later, the infant's actions become directed toward maintaining an affiliation with the significant others.

For many years, the young child depends on others to introduce him/her to other objects or tools used within the extant community, the procedures for using these objects, and the contexts within which the objects are used (Adamson, et al., 2005; Rakoczy, et al., 2005; Wells, 1999). So, for the young child, the emotional

interlace with caregiver(s) provides the psychological, emotional, and physical support needed by the child to venture into the world to explore other objects and people in the environment. When viewed from a human development perspective, the young child's later interest in the symbols and acts associated with literacy development are the consequence of and subsequent to the child's basic need to affiliate with the important others in his or her environment.

Insights into the Relational Aspects of Learning: One Explanation Proffered by Attachment Theory

"Attachment theory and research have offered fundamental insights into early sociopersonality development for the past quarter-century" (Thompson & Raikes, 2003, p. 691). When referencing young children, attachment is defined as the emotional bond formed between the child and primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1979). The emotional bonds established within these first relationships, "lie at the intersection of all of the cognitive, emotional, and social development occurring in the first year" (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005, p. 42). Bowlby (1979) investigated children's responses to their mother and the consequences to children when this relationship is disrupted. It is theorized that attachment has both a protective and an instructive function (Peluso, Peluso, Kern, & White, 2004). The protective function serves to promote the survival of the infant, while the instructive function relies on the attachment figure becoming a secure base from which the child learns about the world. Further, Bowlby (1979) postulated that because of its protective function, attachment needs supersede many others. Thus, a child with unmet attachment needs will seek to achieve the feeling of safety and security, often at the expense of other less critical needs, such as exploring and learning about the world.

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) extended Bowlby's work and provided extensive, detailed descriptions of mothers' sensitivity to their infants' cues, e.g., crying and smiling, and how distinctions in this sensitivity were consequential to the type of attachment relationship between mothers and infants were identified. These consequences involve behavioral and cognitive responses, as well as affective, with all perceived to function as interlocking processes (Ainsworth, et al., 1978). To illustrate the differences in the quality of the mother-child relationship, we provide brief descriptions of three attachment security relationships identified by Ainsworth et al., (1978), secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant.

Secure attachment is characterized by feelings of physical, emotional, and psychological safety in the young child. The secure attachment relationship is based on a history of interactions between child and attachment figure in which the caregiver accurately understands the wants and needs of the child and responds appropriately. Thus, this relationship is distinguished by a harmonious, synchronous relationship in which the child feels confident in his/her ability to communicate with and receive appropriate responses from the attachment figure. The child expresses a need, for example, to be fed, and the caregiver responds by feeding the child. The child perceives, certainly unconsciously, via the responsiveness of the primary caregivers, that the world is responsive. As a consequence, the child develops a sense that he/she has control over the world. This in turn promotes feelings in the child of increased self-worth which enhances social and emotional development.

Insecure attachment is rooted in an interactional history in which the caregiver has been unable to satisfy the needs of the young child (insecure avoidant attachment) or has done so inconsistently (insecure ambivalent attachment). In the case of insecure avoidant attachment, the caregiver consistently fails to understand and meet the nurturing, safety, and security needs of the young child. This rejecting behavior on the part of the caregiver adversely affects the child's self-concept and the child's ability to relate to others. In an unconscious attempt to protect the self from rejection, the child disconnects or avoids intimate relationships in the future. In the case of an insecure ambivalent relationship, the attachment figure inconsistently responds to the wants and needs of the child.

A caveat is set forth when considering these descriptions of the quality of the parent child relationship. Although each, secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant, is described as though it develops within a context involving only caregiver and child with no external influences, this is far from the case. When viewed from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), the parent-child relationship is influenced by contexts not immediately evident. These influences could come from microsystems, other than the home, such as the preschool the child attends; exosystems, such as the parents' work place; and macrosystems, such as national policies. Therefore, multiple factors, not immediately evident, such as challenges and stress brought on by social and economic supports, or lack thereof, potentially influence the moment-to-moment and day-to-day interactions between parents and children (Sroufe, et al., 2005). Regardless of the quality, however, whether secure, insecure avoidant, or ambivalent attachment, this first relationship serves as the foundation for the child's future relationships.

We can also look to the attachment research to provide support for our contention that relational dimensions of literacy development are of primary rather than secondary importance. Adding to this argument, children form attachments to important adults other than their family caregivers. Theoretically, a child's relationship with non-familial significant others, such as teachers, follows the same path as those between a familial significant other in that they are reciprocal, can range in quality, and can be consequential to the children's conception of self and others as well as their academic progress (Oppenheim, Sagi, & Lamb, 1988). Perhaps there is no other non-familial adult that is more significant in a child's life than his/her teacher. In fact, some argue that secure relationships with secondary caregivers (such as teachers) may compensate for insecure attachment relationships with parents (van IJzendoorn & Tavecchio, 1987).

In addition, evidence suggests a correlation between the quality of the child-teacher relationship and children's social and academic behavior in the classroom. As found in child-parent attachment research, children who have secure relationships with their teachers are found to be more socially competent and do better in school than those who have an insecure relationship (Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994). A secure child-teacher relationship is characterized by generally positive affect and low levels of conflict with the child feeling safe and secure and able to use the teacher as a secure base for exploration and learning (Bowlby, 1988). Pianta and Steinberg (1992) suggest that the child-teacher relationship can even serve as a protective factor for children at risk for academic failure. They report that children predicted to be retained at the beginning of kindergarten, but not retained, had more secure relationships with their teacher compared to those retained. Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) examined elements such as closeness and degree of conflict in the teacher-child relationship of children when they were in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Children's social and academic skills were supported when their relationships with teachers were close and had minimal conflict. Sroufe, et al. (2005), in their landmark three decades long study of children born into poverty, asked their then 19 year old participants, "if they ever had a teacher who was 'special' to them, who took a particular interest in them, and whom they felt was 'in their corner'" (p. 211). Most of those who stayed in high school and graduated, responded in the affirmative, while most of those who dropped out, responded in the negative.

The influence of a child's attachment to significant others, first families then teachers, is wide ranging and includes but is not limited to general mental health

(Sroufe, et al., 2005), academic learning (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992), and social development (Sroufe, et al., 2005). According to Bowlby (1979), from these early close relationships, the child develops an “internal-working model of self and significant others” (p. 117). This model “is defined as a dynamic structure containing affectively charged cognitions about one’s lovableness and worthiness” (Cassidy, 1990 cited in Verschueren, Marcoen, & Schoefs, 1996, p. 2493). These mental models provide the lens through which the child interprets the behavior of the important other, predicts the other’s behavior from past experiences, and responds to those predicted behaviors (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990).

Personal Relationships and Literacy Development: Evidence of Influence

As discussed, the importance of the relational aspects of literacy learning garners support from sociocultural theories and the attachment literature. Researchers using a sociocultural lens illustrate how children’s relationships with others influence their literacy work. For example, Matthews and Kesner (2000, 2003), used sociocultural theory as one of several theoretical lenses, to describe the influence children’s relationships with classmates had on their participation in small group literacy work. Children well liked by classmates often assumed leadership of these groups which enhanced their opportunities to use their literacy knowledge. In contrast, children with less positive relationships with classmates often had their literacy expressions ignored or discounted, which restricted their participation. Dyson (1989, 1993, 1999) provides examples of the use of sociocultural theory to examine young children’s writing. Specifically, the author revealed the complex and multi-dimensional levels of influence that young children’s social resources have on their writing process as well as their written products.

Specific connections between caregivers and young children’s literacy development also find support in research informed by the attachment literature. For example, Beegly and Cicchetti (1987) found correlations between attachment and the language production in three-year-olds. In a longitudinal study, Bus and van IJzendoorn (1988) found no difference in the types of literacy activities within the homes of children identified as securely attached from other less securely attached, but they did find a difference in the children’s interest in writing. Bus & van IJzendoorn (1988, 1995) also found that children who are more securely attached to their mothers are read to more often than children whose attachments are less

secure, an important finding given the prominent presence of storybook reading in research on emergent literacy.

A Glaring Omission

Given the decades of support young children's relationships with significant others has garnered in child development and to a lesser extent from literacy research, we wondered if this importance was reflected in literacy study group reports and literacy position statements. To that end, we examined three reports and four position statements related to preschool and primary-grade literacy development. We focused on these levels because: (a) most of the attachment research has focused on this age child, (b) there is general agreement that reading and writing development begins at birth, and (c) currently there is increased interest in literacy development in children from birth to age five. Interest in these very young learners follows years, really decades, of interest in reading acquisition as reflected in numerous study groups, such as the National Early Literacy Panel (Connor, & Tiedemann, 2005) and National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) and federal programs such as Reading First and Early Reading First and legislation such as the Reading Excellence Act and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

We examined these reports and position statements to determine the prominence given to the relational aspects of literacy learning. We ascribed an explicit focus when the report or position statement specifically identified that the relationships between teacher and or family are central to children's literacy learning. For example, "Children need positive, nurturing relationships with adults" was considered an explicit statement (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 16). An implicit focus was ascribed when this relationship was implied, for example, "children have a right to instruction that involves parents and communities in students' academic lives" (International Reading Association, 2000, p. 9).

Table 1 summarizes our determinations. Generally, of the three reports and four position statements examined, only one, Learning to Read and Write Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement, (IRA & NAEYC, 1998) explicitly mentioned the importance of a positive relationship with important adults and one, Family Partnership Position Statement (International Reading Association, 2002), explicitly identified the importance of recognizing connections between families and children. Of the five remaining documents, four, National

Table 1. Explicit, Implicit, or Nonexistent Focus of the Importance of Children’s Personal Relationship with Families and Teachers

Document	Statement of Relationship	Family-Child Relationship Explicit	Teacher-Child Relationship Explicit	Family-Child Implied	Teacher-Child Implied	Relationships not recognized in document
Making A Difference Position Statement (PS) (IRA, 2000)	All children have a right to instruction that involves parents and communities in students’ academic lives			X	X	
Learning to Read Write DAP PS (IRA & NAEYC, 1998)	Young children need positive, nurturing relationships with adults who engage in responsive conversations with individual children, model reading and writing behavior, and foster children’s interest in and enjoyment of reading and writing.	X	X			Importance of Teacher-Child Relationship
Literacy Development Preschool PS (IRA, 2005)	Connect physical, emotional, and social goals in the language and literacy curriculum when appropriate.			X	X	Importance of Teacher-Child Relationship
Family-School Partnership PS (IRA, 2002)	Be aware of importance of family-child connections and be committed to the concept of partnerships with the families of all children	X				Importance of Teacher-Child Relationship
National Reading Panel Report (NRP, 2000)	NONE					Importance of Family, Teacher, Teacher-Child
National Early Literacy Panel Summary (Connor & Tiedemann, 2005)	Future reports will examine environmental and child characteristics that influence young children’s literacy development			X	X	
Teacher Education Task Force Report (TETF, 2007)	Commit to producing teachers who are deeply aware of diversity but also teachers who know how to teach reading to diverse populations			X		Importance of Teacher-Child

Early Literacy Panel, Making a Difference Position Statement, Literacy Development Preschool Position Statement, and Teacher Education Task Force Report implied the importance of family-child relationship and three implied the importance of the teacher-child relationship. Those which imply that the teacher-student relationship is important embeds this importance within language which references teacher competence, such as the teacher provides instruction which respects diversity or the teacher provides instruction within a risk free environment. One document, the National Reading Panel Report, (NRP, 2000), included no reference to the importance of the child's relationship with family or with teachers.

To illustrate this absence, we include a summary of one document examined, *Teaching Reading Well: A Synthesis of the International Reading Association's Research on Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction* (Teacher Education Task Force, 2007). The TETF was charged to identify characteristics of teacher education programs which develop effective reading teachers. The members of the TETF examined the available research and from their synthesis identified six essential qualities of effective teacher preparation programs. Such programs:

- Teach content related to what makes effective readers and what instruction supports that learning.
- Include faculty who model instructional strategies and commit to providing their students an extensive knowledge base.
- Offer multiple, high quality apprenticeships, field experiences, and practica.
- Commit to producing teachers who are not only deeply aware of diversity but also know how to teach reading to diverse populations.
- Commit to ongoing assessment of student performance and program development.
- Are guided by a vision, provided with the necessary resources, and allow faculty control of the program. (TETF, 2007)

The report characterizes the teachers produced from these programs as reflective, valuing mentoring, able to adapt instruction to student needs, respecting diversity, etc. These are certainly necessary qualities and many imply the need for a positive student-teacher relationship. Teachers produced by these programs are, no doubt, competent and graduate with a firm base from which to make their instructional decisions.

What is less certain is how well graduates who exit these programs, understand the central role children's relationships with family members and teachers play in literacy development. To that end, understanding the dynamics which underpin these relationships and the substantive effect they have on literacy development should elevate knowledge of children's relationships with others beyond an implication to an explicit core feature. Furthermore, programs and documents which seek to inform the literacy development of young children, yet fail to foreground the adult-child relationship involved in such development omit the means by which such improvement is delivered.

Implications for Early Childhood Literacy Educators

Programs, study groups, and position statements directed toward the enhancement of young children's literacy development are far reaching in their influence. Unfortunately, these programs and documents rarely identify the relational aspects of literacy development as a primary contributor to that development. Failure to recognize the significant emotional and psychological influence children's early relationships, first families then teachers, have on literacy development omits a foundational source of this development. To make the relational aspect of literacy learning an explicit and central aspect of literacy program, we offer the following suggestions.

Recommit to involving families in their children's education. The oft heard statement, "parents are their children's first teachers" is more than a bow to parents' being the first adults in a child's life. Recognizing the substantive and foundational relationship between child and family requires that schools give more than lip service to family involvement. Often teachers and school administrators indicate in their words and actions a belief that parents either do not care about their children's education or have the ability to assist their children in school (Compton-Lilly, 2003). This view has been challenged by literacy researchers who have examined the literacy prowess of non-mainstream, inner city, and working-class families. These include Heath's (1983) seminal study of Appalachian families, Compton-Lilly's (2003) interviews of the families of her first grade students, and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines' (1988) examination of the literacy lives of inner city families. These are just a few studies that chronicle families typically considered by many mainstream schools as either illiterate, alliterate, or uncaring about their children's school lives that suggest otherwise.

Too often, as Compton-Lilly (2003) asserts, we view literacy teaching as a neutral set of skills. Her interviews with her students' families revealed otherwise and reinforced her commitment to involve parents in her classroom in ways that enhanced, not just reinforced, her own agenda. She surveyed the families about their reading habits and brought them into her classroom to offer their experiences and perspectives about historical events, such as the civil rights movement. During a study of occupations, family members were also provided cameras to photograph their experiences at work. Involving family means more than inviting them to attend an occasional program, and the initiation of that involvement is the responsibility of school administrator's and teachers.

Examine the words you use to mediate literacy instruction. Children who have a secure relationship with a significant other use this security as a base from which they venture forth to explore their world. When this relationship is between a teacher and her students, those children feel secure to explore the instructional opportunities provided for them. And, like adventurous toddlers who use their family members as a secure base from which to venture to explore a new object, these students use their teacher as a secure base from which to explore the world of print. The words teachers use are a primary conductor of the relationship and certainly the one most frequently used to deliver instruction to children. Peter Johnston (2004) takes on the primary medium of literacy instruction - teacher-talk. The premise of his work is that the words teachers use or do not use change the literate lives of their students. A teacher's words are central to creating an, "emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings" (Johnston, 2004, p. 2). Johnston asserts that simple questions such as, How are you planning to go about this? imply a belief in their students' ability to accomplish the task ahead of them, and instills in them a sense of agency. Literacy instruction is not presented in a neutral environment and frequently such instruction is ensconced in the words of the teacher which often carry their own message to the recipients.

Revise the standards which guide your literacy development to forefront the significance of the relationship between teacher and student. Creating and sustaining a close relationship between young children and their teachers must be at the top of any list of standards designed to guide literacy instruction in the early childhood classroom. Carol Santa (2006), past president of the International Reading Association and current co-owner of Montana Academy, a private boarding school

for troubled adolescents, identifies classroom community and relationships as the first of four key principles for improving adolescent literacy. In her experiences with teens she has seen students who for years were disconnected from learning and school. Working with these teens has strengthened her belief that, “the content and the teaching techniques play second fiddle to human relationships” (Santa, 2006, p. 467). IRA and the NAEYC’s (1998) document entitled *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* identifies a positive nurturing relationship with adults as a standard for preschool literacy programs. However, position statements and literacy reports which actually frame literacy instruction often fail to instantiate this principle in practice.

Concluding Thoughts

“In a sense, early experiences (especially with the primary caregiver) help to create a ‘grammar of emotion’ that may be enduring, even though the language of emotion continues to unfold for years to come” (Thompson, 2003 as cited in Sroufe, et al., 2005, p. 219). This statement implies that children’s early relationships not only provide their initial representations of the world, but in fact, these early relationships constitute that world. We maintain that the need to enhance attention to the importance of young children’s relationships with others, in particular families and teachers, is greater today than at any other time. For many young children and their teachers, the stakes are raised for learning to read, a key goal of early literacy learning. High stakes testing creates stress on teachers, parents, and consequently young children. School administrators are threatened with losing their jobs if their schools do not meet Annual Yearly Progress and many of these concerns are passed on to classroom teachers.

We further need to emphasize the teacher-student relationship in literacy development as children are transitioning to school environments earlier. Forty-eight percent of children less than 48 months old and 57% of children 48 to 53 months old are in center-based childcare programs so young children are exposed to other adults in a prime time of their development of sense of self and others (Planty, et al., 2008). A warm, consistent, and responsive relationship with primary caregivers and other significant adults such as teachers provides the young child not only food and physical protection but something just as essential and enduring - a buffer of psychological support. Children who trust their caregivers and teachers feel safe to explore their environment, and through these explorations gain important

knowledge about their world. Moreover, the beginning stage of learning to read has its own unique set of stresses. Alexander (2005) asserts that children in the early stages of learning to read are at the precipice in that development. In her lifespan model of reading development, Alexander maintains children must progress through the Acclimation Stage, the first of three stages in her model, before they can move through subsequent phases. The Acclimation Stage is central to further reading development because it is during this stage that young children must learn how to decode graphic symbols which have no inherent relationship to their oral counterparts.

Many assert the importance of creating an environment of care to envelop the learning that occurs in a classroom. We add our voices to others who call for a need to bring to the foreground the relationships which introduce literacy learning to children. Children's first learning is at the laps and by the sides of their families. Families introduce their offspring to objects, procedures, and activities from which their young gain insights about the world. Teachers are often the next to assume the teaching mantle and often it is via their objects, procedures, and activities young children gain access to another world, the world of print.

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