

Family Literacy Practices: Traditions and Transitions

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Abstract: Family literacy practices are discussed from a historical perspective, highlighting the similarities and differences from ancient to modern times. The content of a family literacy workshop is discussed and scripted lessons for parents are presented.

From ancient times to the present, literacy has taken on different forms, beginning with functional literacy requiring a minimum knowledge of reading and writing (e.g., reading signs, writing letters) to academic literacy, which is usually learned in a school environment. The teaching of literacy was initially a household responsibility, but with the passage of time, it has become a school responsibility. Yet, for some minority students in particular, these school experiences have not yielded sufficient literacy development (Delpit, 2003). Literacy tools that can be used in the home may be useful in alleviating this problem. In a study discussed in this article that investigated parents' perceptions of home literacy, a checklist of specific book-sharing behaviors was used as a parental tool during times they read to their children. The examples of scripted lessons included are additional tools that will be used in future research, as a guide for parents to engage their children in best reading practice techniques related to phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

The purpose of this article is to discuss family literacy practices and propose some that can be useful in today's society. First, a discussion of the ancient and early American literacy traditions is presented. Then a discussion of the contemporary family literacy movement follows. A study conducted by the first author on parents' perceptions of literacy at home is provided. This research led to the creation of a family literacy workshop which is explained within this article. Lastly, examples of scripted lessons that will allow parents to engage their children in the best reading practices are provided.

Ancient Literacy Trends

Historians believe people learned to read and write in Sumeria around 3500 B.C. and that literacy was at first passed from father to son and then occasionally to the daughters of the Middle East (Claiborne, 1974; Smethurst, 1975). In the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley, Brahman education appeared to have been administered by the father with the purpose to train priests (Keay, 1992). In Biblical times, the Hebraic tradition placed the responsibility for children's learning to read and write upon the father (Smith, 1969). The Athenian law required fathers to teach their sons to read, and in ancient Rome, education was carried on exclusively in the household under the direction of the father (Smith, 1955). In Anglo-Saxon England, while the girls of the lower class received instruction in home economics and boys followed through with agricultural chores, their wealthier counterparts were instructed in schools and monasteries (Adamson, 1946; Smethurst, 1975).

Early American Literacy Traditions

The American colonists as heirs to English traditions promoted the household as the principal agency of literacy instruction with a focus on learning the scriptures and becoming familiar with the laws of the land (Cremin, 1970). Several widely-distributed books on familial education during that period slated the father as the head of the household (Davis, 1998; Dod & Cleaver, 1998; Gouge, 1988) and possibly the primary educator in the home. By 1642, parent teaching or its equivalent was required by law for the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Cremin, 1970; Cubberley, 1919; Gordon & Gordon, 2003). In 1647, the Old Deluder Satan ordinance of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was the first law requiring compulsory education and setting up schools in the colonies. In areas where there were no schools, parents and masters were mandated to instruct the children to read English (Johnson, 1904/1963). Although families were still expected to teach literacy in the homes, the Old Deluder Satan Act required communities of 100 or more households to establish a grammar school (primary purpose of the school was to teach Latin) and those with 50 or more to open a petty (elementary) school (Shurtleff, 1853). The early American primers were written for use by parents and teachers (Johnson, 1904, 1963) with the primary purpose of teaching the children the doctrines and moral precepts of Christianity (Morgan, 1966).

The other thirteen colonies embraced the concept of literacy education outside of the home at varying degrees of acceptance (Gordon & Gordon, 2003). From about 1695 to 1775, most New Yorkers of the Mid-Atlantic colonies tutored their children at home, by apprenticeships or in the churches, often associating the charity schools offered by the Dutch Reformed congregations, the Jewish community, and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel introduced by the southern colonies with pauperism (Schultz, 1973). A slow reformation emerged to accept free education with the opening of the first free public grammar school in 1805 (Kammen, 1975).

Although the proliferation of petty schools and grammar schools opening from state to state allowed for many more children to receive free education, many parents opted to continue to teach their children at home. This nineteenth century movement was an outcry against the overcrowdedness and “tasked lessons” of the schoolroom (Gordon & Gordon, 2003, p. 83). Factors such as the parents’ need to have the children help with farming during the harvesting season or the inability of some children to become comfortable within the confines of a classroom contributed to resistance to compulsory education. In these homes, the mother was the primary educator, instructing the child in reading, spelling, word definitions, handwriting, math, and character education (Kuhn, 1947).

In other parts of the nation such as in the Antebellum South, the laws passed permitting educational systems were ignored. Although many parents acted as teachers for their children, illiteracy among native-born Southern Whites measured at about 20 percent in 1860 as compared to .04 percent among the native-born New Englanders (Gordon & Gordon, 2003). In addition, numerous laws prohibited the schooling of African Americans (Bellows, 1993; Calhoun, 1945; Cornelius, 1991; Cremin, 1980; Morison, 1965). The few slaves who did learn to read were among house servants, city workers, or children who went to school as companions for their master’s children. Others were taught by Black or White teachers under adverse circumstances. The Bible was the most important book to read to most slaves (Cornelius, 1991).

In 1880, states that had passed compulsory laws for schools saw no growth in attendance. However, with each passing year, the mandate and enforcement of these laws created an increase in school attendance. In 1870, 20% of the population (10 years and older) was illiterate; by

1920, illiteracy had shrunk to 6% (Morison & Comager, 1960; U. S. Census Bureau, 1965). Factors such as the need to assimilate immigrants to the American way of life (Cubberley, 1909) and more mothers working outside of the home as a result of the two world wars, contributed to the increased responsibility of teaching literacy in the schools (Prost & Vincent, 1991). However, domestic education continued as a preferred choice until the tax-based schooling of the twentieth century (Goodrich, 1841; Humphrey, 1840).

Contemporary Family Literacy Movement

The 1950s and 1960s back-to-phonics movement was encouraged particularly by educators and parents who supported Rudolf Flesch's book, *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It*. Flesch (1955) encouraged parents to teach the child phonics at home in contrast to the "look-say" method that was prevalent in the schools at the time. On the other hand, Banton-Smith (1963) suggested that parents balance their reading instruction with response, listening, and encouragement. Banton-Smith (1963) also suggested that the parent read to the child and let the child select his or her own books. In addition, the 1960s and 1970s sparked a research impetus on studies related to lower income families in response to the Civil Rights movement and the campaign for educational equality. Experts in reading, linguistics, educational psychology, and sociology at that time sought to determine the connections between success and failure in school as related to the literacy approaches of parents in the home (Billingsley, 1968; Coleman et al., 1966; Durkin, 1966; Durkin, 1974-75; Stack, 1974). This paradigm shift brought in greater interest in cross-cultural studies that questioned universal assumptions of parental practices (New, 2001).

One such study was conducted by Duren (2006) with 152 parents: 38 low-income Hispanic, 38 middle-income Hispanic, 38 low-income African American, and 38 middle-income African American. The parents were asked to check those items with which they agreed on the Parents' Perceptions of Literacy Learning Interview Survey (Anderson, 1995), which consisted of an equal number of items from the traditional skills-based and emergent literacy-based orientations. According to Vacca, Vacca, and Gove (2000), traditionalists think that children must master a set of rudimentary skills before they can learn to read or write (i.e., children learn to read or write in a sequential or hierarchal order and children master reading before writing). Those who agree with this view also believe that reading and writing should be taught in a school-like setting (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). In contrast, emergent literacy, also known as metalinguistic awareness, print awareness, early literacy, concepts about print, and literacy before schooling (Sulzby & Teale, 1996), is characterized as children's early literacy behaviors and their development in informal settings at home and at school prior to the onset of formal literacy instruction (Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000). A central tenet of this perspective is that children can acquire crucial foundation skills and an understanding of literacy well before the onset of formal instruction if significant others engage the child in literacy activities (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Consistent with prior findings that indicate low-income families are typically skills-based in their belief structure, the low-income African American and Hispanic parents of this study believed in the traditional skills approach, surmising that these parents find it necessary for children to have sufficient school readiness skills prior to learning to read or write.

To help low income minority parents see the value in engaging children in literacy experiences at home, the first author created a parenting workshop titled Reading MATTERS (see Appendix A). Each letter of the model represents a best practice or pattern in a parent-child booksharing activity that is discussed and/or demonstrated in the hour long workshops. Some

things that are discussed in the workshops include reading for at least 20 minutes per day, sitting close to the child while reading, and asking questions during the book sharing. There is teacher demonstration, parent input, and practice intertwined within each of the six workshops.

A 10-item Parent/Child Reading Survey was used as a pre- and post-test measurement to determine the parents' ability and frequency to share books with their children. The survey measures literacy-related behaviors demonstrated by the parent while reading to the child on a likert scale of "Always," "Sometimes," or "Never". Items include "I choose books my child can understand," "I sit in a position to allow my child to see the book," "I point to the pictures," "I point to the words," "I use expression in my voice," "I make motions and/or sounds when appropriate," "I ask 'Wh' questions about the book," "I relate the stories in the books to real life events," and "I stop reading when my child loses interest." The results of two ANOVAs and a contingency table indicated a significant workshop effect, demonstrating a positive relationship between the number of workshops conducted and the number of "always" answers on the checklist scores (compared to "sometimes" or "never").

In addition, the quality of parent-child bookreading activity could be seen by the parents' performances while reading books to their children during the Reading MATTERS workshops. The incorporation of techniques that were noted included asking "Wh" questions, relating the story to real life, sitting with the book in the lap of the parent or in front of the child at eye level to enable the child to see the book, taking a look at the pictures in the book, and defining unfamiliar words for the child. From their discussion, the parents were indeed interested in acquiring new techniques that could be incorporated into their style of reading. Although the value of the family literacy workshops were clearly expressed by the parents, many of them were unable to attend the workshops consistently due to familial, work, and other factors.

Literacy has its foundation in the home, and it is built upon with the commencement of formal schooling. Many low-income African and Hispanic Americans believe that the teacher is primarily responsible for their children's reading education. Yet, while they believe in this traditional skills-based approach, they can and do respond positively when taught otherwise (Edwards, 1994, 2004).

Implications

Workshops are sometimes difficult for parents to attend and costly to hold; therefore, future research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the parents' use of scripted lessons (see examples in Appendix B) related to best reading practices without a parenting workshop. The scripted lessons reach beyond the emergent literacy level and can be used for elementary-aged children. It is also anticipated that these parent-friendly lessons will provide guidance on how to implement best reading practices at home and serve as a conduit between school and family literacy practices.

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Appendix A

READING

- M** Read only when the child is in the **MOOD** to participate. He/She will remember the positive and negative reading experiences.
- A** Select a variety of books depending on the child's **AGE**. Check with your child's teacher or a local librarian for suggestions.
- T** Set aside **TIME** during the week to read. It is recommended that your child reads to you or is read to for at least 20 minutes regularly.
- T** **TEST** for understanding by asking "Wh" (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) questions while reading.
- E** Use **EXPRESSION** to make your reading exciting. This will keep your child interested and model proper oral reading.
- R** **RELATE** stories to real-life events and people. These connections will add to the meaning and discussion of the story.
- S** **SIT** in a way that you and the child can see the book. An emotional bond is established as you and your child sit together to read.

Appendix B

Sample scripted lesson related to vocabulary development

Dewdney, A. (2005). *Llama llama red pajama*. New York, NY: Viking.

Description: After the baby llama kisses his mother llama goodnight, he feels lonely and also wants a drink. Baby llama calls downstairs to his mama. She acknowledges him and says she'll

be up to see him soon. However, the phone rings and she forgets to go up to him while talking. He frets, moans, cries, stomps, pouts, jumps, shouts, and finally weeps and wails loud enough to get her to run to his rescue. Mama llama reprimands him gently for such ‘llama drama,’ but also reassures him that she’s always near. She then kisses him as he snuggles deep into his pillow and blanket and falls asleep.

Skill focus: Scaffolded silent reading

Explanation of skill to parent: Scaffolded silent reading can be used with books your child has found easy to read. If you need help with finding books that are easy for your child to read, ask his or her reading teacher, the media specialist at his or her school, or a librarian in your neighborhood’s library. After the book is chosen, have the child read the book for a total of 20 minutes (this can be broken up into two 10-minute segments for kindergarten to second grade students). As the child reads the book silently, stop the child at various spots throughout the book and ask him or her to read that page (or a portion of it) aloud. In addition, ask the child “Wh” questions (Who, What, When, Where, Why) about that section to determine if he or she understands what was read.

Sight Words: a, with, at, up

Sample related to Phonics

Strickland, P., & Strickland, H. (2002). *Dinosaur roar!* New York, NY: Puffin.

Description: Dinosaurs are used to emphasize opposites and also to make “munching” sounds that the young reader would enjoy repeating. There are a number of rhyme words and quite a few interesting words such as “meek” and “slimy” that can be taught in context and with the aid of illustrations.

Skill focus: Discuss the opposite terms in the book.

The book has many examples of opposites. This includes "Dinosaur weak, dinosaur strong," "Dinosaur short or very, very long," and "Dinosaur spiky, Dinosaur lumpy."

Parent focus: This can be followed by the parent pointing out items in the kitchen that represent opposites. Here are some suggestions:

cookie - round	block of cheese - square
faucet - cold	faucet - hot
foil - thin	kitchen towel - thick
straw - long	toothpick - short
sugar - sweet	salt - bitter
water - clear	milk - not clear
fork - rough tip	spoon - smooth tip
cabinets above	cabinets below
light on	light off

The parent can show other items and their opposites such as a hard bottom to a chair versus the soft cushion of the sofa or the small speaker on the phone in contrast to the large speaker of the stereo.