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Family Literacies: Shared Reading with Young Children

Rachael Levy and Mel Hall

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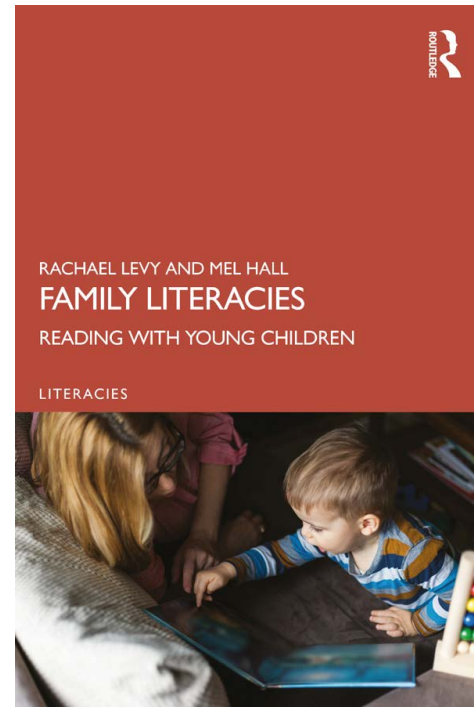
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While “family literacy” has been a popular term and concept in para-educational settings since the 1980s, it has often focused on using home life to meet educational aims, rather than studying the family as a site of literate experiences in its own right. In their book *Family Literacies: Reading with Young Children*, Rachael Levy and Mel Hall intentionally move away from school-based aims for pre- and primary-school children to instead ask what *families* get from creating, sustaining, and sharing literacy experiences. They explore a widely acknowledged, but surprisingly under-researched, family literacy practice: reading with young children. Levy and Hall frame what they call “shared reading” as a familial act that shapes routines, reinforces emotional bonds, and displays familial “belonging” both to family members and outsiders. Focusing on children who have not yet started school allows them to explore “shared reading” as a separate activity from “learning to read,” though their findings have major implications for both pre-school community literacy programs and, potentially, primary classrooms.

The book draws on findings from the Shared Reading Project, which interviews families to understand how shared reading “is perceived in their homes and how it fits (or does not fit) within everyday family life” (13). Levy and Hall’s findings stress the importance of understanding the habits and goals of individual families, in order to create programming that supports ongoing literacy practices rather than promoting school readiness. Demonstrating the difference in findings that a shift in focus can yield, the authors examine families and homes, rather than programs, until they discuss implications in the book’s final chapters. The authors use theory and methods from sociology to study shared reading as a feature of everyday life, asking what the activity achieves *for families* and making reading a means to an end, rather than a goal.

The book is clearly laid out in ten chapters: an introduction to gaps in family reading research, two chapters reviewing relevant work on reading as a sociological



practice and shared reading as a topic of study, one chapter laying out their study's methodological choices and ethical commitments, two chapters discussing findings, two chapters discussing implications, and a conclusion that imagines what shared reading, as defined here, could mean for families once children begin school. The clarity and care of these chapters is a particular strength of *Family Literacies: Reading with Young Children*, at every level of organization. Levy and Hall are careful to explain their interlocutors without heavy theoretical discussions and to make explicit connections between pieces of their study, indicating a desire for findings to be quickly understood and implications quickly put into practice. While this work contributes to family literacy scholarship, it's clear that the authors anticipate practitioners reading and making use of their findings in daily work.

Chapter one, "Reading with Young Children: An Introduction," lays out the central goal of the research study: "to understand what families do when they read with their children," as well as the values, beliefs, and personal choices that inform the practice (9). Previewing the larger conversations of the book, Levy begins with a personal narrative about the importance of shared reading and storytelling in her childhood home. While her own parents neither read on their own nor pushed educational attainment, reading together throughout the day was a treasured activity during her childhood. Using this narrative, the authors invite readers to wonder what motivates parents to read to their children. They focus especially, though not exclusively, on economically disadvantaged families, at whom reading intervention programs are most often aimed.

Having previewed big themes, the writers home in on "reading" and "shared reading" as terms. Drawing from Levy's earlier research with pre- and primary-school children, the authors argue that school discourses couple "reading" with phonetic instruction and mastering skills. When reading was seen as a linear process of learning to de-code print, rather than a meaningful engagement with a text, children as young as kindergarten saw themselves as "poor" readers, or even non-readers. While the authors take it for granted that "most of us want children to become confident, motivated, and engaged readers," they suggest that we must recognize reading as a more fluid construct than traditional school discourse dictates. Studying reading practices within homes—not to "find out what's wrong" but rather "to understand what families do when they read with their children"—offers a way to see reading as a complex set of socio-culturally embedded practices (9). With this in mind, they turn to shared reading, defined as "an activity where a child is engaged in focusing on a text with another person (usually an adult) for a sustained period of time" (9). They define text broadly, to include digital texts and e-readers, though nearly all examples of shared reading within the study were print-based. The authors also clarify that while "shared reading" could mean "reading to a child" or "listening to a child read," the book focuses on the former. Thus, they study the relationship between a caretaking adult and a young child, mediated by a visual text, and distance themselves from studies of reading "mastery." These kinds of careful, expansive definitions—in which the authors specify their use of terms while offering further possibilities for work outside of

their own—characterize the book. This sophisticated move invites further work in the same vein, while carving out a niche for this study within family literacy cannon.

In chapter two, “Sociological Perspectives on Reading,” Levy and Hall establish the book as primarily a sociological study of reading. Because reading is an everyday practice “deeply embedded in constructions of class, worth, and value,” a central purpose of this chapter is to explore how reading functions as a social practice, and how the discourses surrounding it both shape reading practices and people’s identities as “readers” (17). They begin by defining “socialization” as an ongoing practice of finding one’s identity by interpreting and enacting the values of one’s communities. Using Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, they locate school and home as two dominant spheres that children navigate between as they learn to identify and value themselves as “readers.” Comparisons between these two spaces helps disrupt an assumption that home literacy experiences should feed into school goals. Instead, they suggest the opposite: Levy’s previous play-based research with young readers indicates that a scholastic focus on phonics narrows children’s definition of reading and thus their view of themselves as “readers.” Homes, on the other hand, seem to provide a broader definition of reading, because members of the family—including children—have an active role in shaping family values and using literacy activities to accomplish their own purposes. Discovering these purposes is a central thrust of the book, but the authors suggest two possibilities: 1) shared reading not only creates physical and emotional bonds between family members and 2) it “displays” the family (broadly defined) as a unit that does “family” things for both members and outsiders. Findings chapters explore how individual families discuss and complicate these two motivations for shared reading.

Chapter three “Shared Reading Practices,” acts as a second literature review that brings sociological discussions of literacy into conversation with current research on shared reading practices. Again, the book focuses on adults reading to children, rather than listening to them read, further creating further separation from skill-based perceptions of reading. The authors also re-emphasize children’s agency in shared reading activities, which continues to be an important theme in findings. Previous research, they argue, indicates social, emotional, and mental benefits of shared reading for both children and parents. Using “bedtime stories,” as an extended example from literature, however, the authors demonstrate that institutional suggestions for shared reading are embedded in socio-cultural discourses of that often privilege white middle-class literacies and require certain material needs to be met. In order to ensure that more families can develop shared reading practices that fit their daily lives, the authors suggest a sustained focus on how and why individual families incorporate reading into their daily routines, as well as barriers they encounter.

In chapter four, “Researching Family Lives,” the authors lay out their study constraints and decisions. Unsurprisingly, most work on shared reading has tended to treat children’s linguistic development as an end goal—in line with educational outcomes. Diverging from this trend, Levy and Hall emphasize “understanding *families* and their everyday practices” (47, emphasis in original). To this end, they conducted semi-structured narrative interviews in participants’ homes, which allowed them to

ask about family's routines and shared reading's place within the seemingly mundane practices of everyday life. They also asked about parents' current reading practices and memories of reading as children, to understand whether and how previous associations with reading impacted reading with children (52–53). The twenty-nine parents interviewed are linguistically, racially, educationally and economically diverse, but are all participants in a broader research program called, "Promoting Language Development by Shared Reading." Participation in this research not only created a natural way to invite families into the study but also might have meant that parents were already reflecting on their shared reading practices. Further, it's likely that the types of families participating would either be invited to or voluntarily attend other family literacy programs, even though findings are not meant to be generalizable. In addition to clearly explained study constraints, a merit of this chapter is Levy and Hall's discussion about the ways they occupied "inside" and "outside" positions in conversations with research participants and the ethical considerations they made as a result. Their awareness of power dynamics and their researcher roles is an important reminder of the tenuous space of research and the need for close attention to the interactions between research methodologies and the real people involved.

Chapter five, "Shared Reading as an Everyday Family Practice," is the first of four chapters reporting trends in study findings, all of which focus on how shared reading time currently fits into family life and how families use it to coordinate their days and build bonds. Practically, families use shared reading to solidify their routines and manage aspects of family life. Specific texts are used to support aspects of parenting, such as teaching family values and reinforcing skills like toilet training. Shared reading might help transition to a different activity or type of energy. Relationally, parents use shared reading to build family bonds, a complex process that parents discussed in diverse ways, including through protecting quality time, establishing their parental identity and granting children agency to decide when and how they read. This discussion builds on the idea of displaying "family-ness" through the activities that family members engage in together. In addition to giving quality time, shared reading was also a sensory experience, providing physical closeness that might not have happened without the mediation of a text. The emphasis on using shared reading to accomplish existing family goals, whether maintaining routines or building close bonds, stands in contrast to interventions that want to add in reading time without asking about the individual family's routines or desires.

Chapter six, "Doing and Sustaining Shared Reading; Parents' Aims and Motivations," turns from reading as part of everyday practice to the reasons that parents intentionally make shared reading a habit. The relationship between these two chapters is organic, but chapter six notes the felt benefits that keep parents engaging in shared reading with their children rather than exploring reading within the "pool of activities that make up everyday family life" (82). A significant finding, surprising for the lack of research surrounding it, is parents' focus on the mutual enjoyment found in shared reading times. For some families, and at some times, enjoyment looks like introducing calm and cozy into the wildness of life with toddlers. For others, shared reading tends to be boisterous and energetic, meant to entertain and bring laughter.

Parents consistently reported that 1) they read because they enjoyed the shared time, even if they did not read for pleasure on their own and 2) that if they or their children did not enjoy the time, then they would be less likely engage in it. The enjoyment, then, stems from the atmosphere that shared reading helps to create, and the feedback parents receive from their children, rather than from merely the act of reading itself. For some families, watching their children learn was *part* of receiving positive feedback, but it was not a central motivation. Linguistic development, a central goal in educational programs, is linked with enjoyment, but more like a nice bonus than a motivation. Once again textual engagement serves as a means for creating a certain kind of experience, rather than the goal of the activity. The links between enjoyment, feedback, and to a lesser extent, learning, are key in the following chapters. The intentional ways that Levy and Hall look backward and forward in these finding chapters is useful for researchers, but particularly important for practitioners. The clear scaffolding in these chapters sets up practitioners to align their practices more closely with family motivations.

In chapter seven, “Barriers to Shared Reading,” Levy and Hall use findings to extend research identifying what keeps parents from making shared reading a practice. While all but one parent in the Shared Reading Project said that they regularly read with their children, maintaining the habit was not uncomplicated. Seasons of family stress, parents’ mental health, and socio-cultural backgrounds that prioritize togetherness, but not necessarily reading, or prioritize education but not reading for pleasure, were all seen to impact habitual engagement in shared reading times. The degree to which barriers impacted shared reading differed from family to family, demonstrating that cultural or class background does not determine a parents’ likelihood of reading with their children. On the other hand, families from lower income brackets depended slightly more on positive feedback to continue making reading a habit than did families in higher income brackets. When parents perceived a lack of interest from their children, those from higher income brackets were more likely to push forward, often citing educational reasons, than those from lower income brackets. This is a key takeaway for practitioners and educators hoping to increase reading frequency at home, because the kinds of barriers families list in interviews are less likely to be considered than say, access to reading material, which was not a barrier that any family in the study named. Further, increasing *enjoyment* and *positive feedback* may not be a commonly forwarded goal, but Levy and Hall assert that this is a mistake, given that the affective benefits of shared reading hold much greater appeal than the promise of school readiness. In this chapter, Levy and Hall begin to foreshadow the recommendations in later chapters, while maintaining a focus on the individual family unit. An end goal in asking how shared reading fits into the “minutiae” of everyday life, then, is not simply understanding of how reading fits, but a course correction for practitioners seeking to create interventions that work for a greater variety of families.

While the previous three chapters focus on parents’ current relationship with shared reading, chapter eight, “Parents’ Relationships with Reading,” asks whether past experiences with reading—either in school or families of origin—impacts parents’ attitudes toward the activity. The authors particularly wanted to know wheth-

er a poor relationship with reading, stemming perhaps from experiences in school, made parents less willing to read with their children. While about a third of parents said they did not enjoy reading for themselves and/or had negative associations with reading as a child, this did not impact their enjoyment of shared reading with their own children. Most of the chapter is focused on this group of parents—who did not read as a child but does read with their own children—in the hopes of finding ways to support current shared reading habits and perhaps help their children continue to enjoy reading. For many of these parents, negative associations stemmed from the narrowed definitions of reading they found in school, struggles with phonics, and memories of being asked to read aloud. With their own children, however, parents did not feel the same pressure to perform and expressed pleasure in the shared experience. Some parents even reported feeling like stronger readers, or finding pleasure reading on their own. Levy and Hall suggest that, following the lead of these families, we should consider *shared reading* as a more expansive concept than mastering language or even gleaning meaning from a text. *Shared reading*, then, includes the sensory and affective aspects of reading as well as the time spent exploring a text. It is often child-led and can move back and forth through the pages of a text, skipping over pages or lingering on pictures. It can even include time spent discussing days or telling stories separate from the physical text, since shared reading often facilitates these moments. While the other findings chapters held fascinating insights, I found this one the most rewarding as a reader. I had a sense that parents were undoing some of the harm that a focus on phonetic mastery and reading schemas had caused, through reading with their children. I found myself hoping, as the next chapter turns to implications, that these study results might answer some of the anxiety over “literacy crises” as educators and program organizers help parents find joy in shared reading without a focus on educational milestones.

Chapter nine, “Working with Families to Promote Shared Reading,” turns explicitly to practitioners—including pre-school teachers, literacy program organizers, librarians, social workers, and family therapists—helping families include shared reading in their daily lives. This chapter has a different timbre than the findings chapters. While the four previous chapters drew heavily from sociology to tell the stories of family routines, motivations, and values, this chapter acknowledges that such a study can be used to design better interventions to aid in literacy development. The focus on individual families remains, however, as Levy and Hall remind practitioners that “while they may have expertise in areas related to their own profession, the experts in being in this family are this family” (137). They thus urge practitioners to ask thoughtful questions about a family’s daily practices, including reading, and to encourage shared reading work as it is already happening. Linguistic development, they remind, is a side-effect of time spent with texts, but without a cycle of positive feedback families are unlikely to spend their leisure time in shared reading. Because research shows that toddlers and infants benefit from the stimulation of being read to but are less likely than older children to give obviously positive feedback, practitioners are encouraged to help parents expand their concept of engagement. Far from

being taught how to read “correctly” with their children, parents may need encouragement that they’re doing it right, and a release from educational expectations.

In chapter ten, “Shared Reading and Starting School—A Conclusion” the authors look toward the implications of their findings when children start school. Although the study focuses on shared reading with very young children, school discourse looms large over the rest of the book: Levy and Hall frequently remind us that a phonics focus narrows definitions of what constitutes a “reader,” even in early grades, and parents’ discussions of their own reading experiences underscores this finding. Thus, an ending chapter focused the study’s implications for school age reading helps to ease the sense that the joy of shared reading would necessarily diminish for these families. While the rest of the book has looked at individuals, Levy and Hall here consider what the implications of their study might do to answer educational aims. They point out that a focus on phonics, which narrows “reading” to “de-coding sounds,” does very little to help readers analyze whole texts or consider their socio-cultural contexts. Further, as cited throughout the book, narrowed visions of reading can cause some students to think of themselves as “poor readers” discouraging them from engaging further with texts. Thus, while educational institutions have long asked families to partner in meeting *school* goals, Levy and Hall suggest the opposite: that schools might learn from individual families’ reading motivations and partner to meet their goals instead. In this and the previous chapter, they encourage practitioners to think of shared reading in terms of “text, talk, time, and togetherness”—a convenient way of summing up family’s descriptions of shared reading’s benefits to their daily life. Schools and community literacy programs, they suggest, might consider how text facilitates the other three, rather than asking time and togetherness to serve texts.

Family Literacies: Reading with Young Children is an important book for CLJ readers because of how often we occupy a liminal space between community members and educational institutions. A lot of community literacy work in education has focused on helping high school and college writers move away from the legacy of school discourses toward thinking of literacy as a complex set of socio-culturally embedded processes. Much less work had examined those youngest of readers and their textual engagement previous to entering classrooms. And yet, given the number of community programs aimed at “school readiness,” it’s worth asking “how do we design literacy programs that support and encourage families’ love of reading on their own terms?” Levy and Hall’s book offers insights from their population of families and gives a clear model for gaining insight into families’ routines and motivations.