

DEVELOPING YOUNG CHILDREN S LITERACY : FAMILY LITERACY PRACTICES

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Abstract

This paper will present two researches on family literacy and how they develop the children s early literacy behaviors . The first research looked into the literacy behaviors of preschool age children with ages ranging from three to five years and what home environment factors influenced the acquisition of these literacy behaviors . The second research looked into the training of urban poor families into literacy and numeracy through training modules , and looked into how these parents can develop and enhance their own literacy and numeracy and then teach these to their children .

Key words

young children ; literacy ; family literacy practices

Introduction

Developing literacy among the beginning learners is a challenging task . Reading and writing abilities don t just happen . They are acquired , nurtured and refined through the acts of those who provide appropriate instructional contexts and support (Strickland 2003) . The provision of appropriate instructional context and support does not start in school . Educators look into what happens before the children go to school ; the environment and exposure in the home that triggers the acquisition of literacy . Tracey (in Strickland & Morrow 2000) looked into the ways in which at home literacy experiences can potentially affect their literacy learning in school . Schools need to view family literacy as part of the curriculum .

This paper will present two researches on family literacy and how they develop the children s early literacy behaviors . The first research looked into the literacy behaviors of preschool age children with ages ranging from three to five years and what home environment factors influenced the acquisition of these literacy behaviors . The second research looked into the training of urban poor families into literacy and numeracy through training modules , and looked into how these parents can develop and enhance their own literacy and numeracy and then teach these to their children .

Home Environment and Literacy Behaviors of Preschool -Age Filipino Learners

The first research dealt with the literacy behaviors of preschool age children coming from middle and lower socioeconomic levels and how the home environment may have influenced the acquisition of these behaviors . Two basic questions were answered by the research :

- 1 . What literacy behaviors are manifested by preschool age children who have not yet attended any preschool education ?
- 2 . What kind of home environment do the preschool age children who manifest good literacy behaviors have ?

Sixty eight preschool age children with ages ranging from three to five who were not yet going to school were the subjects of the study . Thirty three of them came from middle class families while the rest came from low socioeconomic level .

Literacy Behaviors of Preschool Age Children

In order for the literacy behaviors of these children to manifest ,they were given simulated lessons and activities in a print rich classroom . Two hours a day for ten days . The activities consisted of the following :

Free reading and free writing —the children were allowed to browse over storybooks or to go to the writing corner to write or draw . The exposure to books was aimed at observing each child's reaction to ,process of choosing ,and attention to books . Likewise ,their book handling behaviors were observed . The free writing activity was aimed at observing the children's early writing behaviors and their stages in writing .

Getting their name tags from the pocket chart —as each child comes ,he /she gets his /her name tag from the pocket chart . This aimed to find out what cues they use to recognize their names , and later ,their classmates names .

Singing or reciting nursery rhymes —the children listened to taped nursery rhymes ,then they themselves sang these . The activity aimed at finding out their phonological awareness .

Story reading ,discussion and children's retelling of stories —this activity aimed at observing the children's interest in storybooks ,as well as their participation before ,during and after story reading . Fourteen storybooks written in Filipino (the children's home language) were chosen for this activity .

Drawing ,coloring or writing activity —based on the story that they listened to ,the children draw ,color ,or write . The activities aimed to observe not only into their fine muscle development ,but their ability to generate ideas .

Story retelling —the activity looked into the ability of the children to recall the events ,setting and characters in the story .

Individual interview —each child was called to identify the environmental prints ,popular logos and labels ,the letters of the alphabet ,and to match the upper with the lower case letters .

The observations were documented using a Literacy Behavior Checklist which the researcher constructed and was validated by a panel of experts . Frequencies ,percentages ,means and standard deviations were taken to describe the subjects .

Summary of Findings

Book Orientation Behaviors . The activity aimed at observing the children's reaction to ,process of choosing ,attention to books and book handling behaviors . Majority of the subjects from the middle socioeconomic level got books without any prompting ,while majority of those from the lower SES got a book after adult prompting . The familiarity of the former group with storybooks explained their behavior . In terms of the process of choosing books ,majority of those from the middle SES chose carefully from a variety of books looked at while the latter initially got any book in the shelf . In terms of attention to books that they got ,majority from both groups flipped the pages sequentially and looked at the illustrations .

Among the ten book handling behaviors ,majority of the learners from both groups manifested the following :(1) showed the front and back part of the book ,(2) held the book properly ,(3) opened the book to the correct beginning of the story ,(4) pointed the top and bottom of the page ,and (5) flipped the pages of the book correctly .

Less than 50 % of the children manifested the following behaviors :(1) pointed the print ,not the illustration ,as the carrier of the story message ,(2) pointed the word that begins the story ,(3) traced

with the finger the storyline from left to right (4) made the correct return sweep (5) said (or showed) that the text on the left page should be read (or looked at first).

Everyday, the teacher researcher read a storybook to the children. This aimed at observing their behavior during the prereading activities, while the book is being read and during the postreading activities. In terms of participation before, during and after the storyreading, the following behaviors were observed from the majority of the children: (1) listened intently and paid attention to the illustration, (2) kept quiet during the storyreading, (3) participated minimally during the discussion. Although majority manifested interest in the storyreading, and eagerly anticipated this activity everyday, it took time before they were motivated to make comments during the discussion and to participate by answering the questions. 19% however, loved to do story retelling and they were able to include the details and the main events of the story in their retelling.

Early Recognition of Print. The following behaviors and skills were observed: giving letter names of upper and lower case letters, matching the upper with the lower case letters, identifying popular logos and labels and identifying their name. The table below shows the performance of the children in the lower socioeconomic level (Group 1) and the children from the middle socioeconomic level (Group 2).

Table 1. Early Recognition of Print by the Preschool-Age Children

Behaviors	No. of items given	Mean of group 1 (lower SES)	Mean of group 2 (middle SES)
Giving letter names of upper case letters	26	1.89	5.28
Giving letter names of lower case letters	26	1.33	2.78
Matching upper case with lower case letters	26	6.94	8.75
Identifying popular logos and labels	8	3.08	5.44
Identifying own name	1	.06	.28

The table shows that all the preschool age children can identify several letters of the alphabet. They can identify more upper than lower case letters. They can match easily the upper case letters that are similar to the lower case letters. They can identify the environmental prints, popular labels and logos. Some of them can identify their own names written on name tags. It is interesting to note that in all the activities, the children from the middle class families performed better than the children from the lower class families.

Early Writing Behaviors. Table 2 shows the writing behaviors of the children in lower socioeconomic level (Group 1) and the children from the middle socioeconomic level (Group 2).

Table 2. Writing Behaviors of the Preschool-Age Children

Writing Behaviors	Mean of group 1 (lower SES)	Mean of group 2 (middle SES)
Writing stage		
Used scribble for both writing and drawing	.44	.41
Used letter-like figures in scribbles	.25	.28
Formed conventional-looking letters	.21	.16

Directionality		
No directional pattern	.51	.53
Knew part of directional pattern (top to bottom ; left to right)	.09	.09
Had directional pattern	.32	.28
Strokes		
Wrote with light strokes	.41	.50
Wrote with firm strokes	.59	.50

The writing behaviors manifested by both groups is interesting because among the three domains , book orientation ,early recognition of print and writing ,this is the domain where the lower SES children performed better . Writing is a function of the fine motor skills ;and this result showed the over protectiveness of the middle SES homes , which deter the young children from developing their fine muscles at an early stage .

Home Environment of the Preschool -Age Children

The research explored the home environment of the children which would have influenced directly and indirectly their literacy acquisition prior to going to school and being taught conventional literacy . The data gathering was done through home visitation ,to observe the family environment and the interaction among family members ,and conducting interviews to the parents and other significant adults in the home ,guided by the Home Environment Questionnaire constructed by the researcher for the purpose and validated by a panel of experts composed of a psychologist ,a sociologist and a reading specialist .

The following home environment factors and practices were found to influence the development of these literacy behaviors :

- 1 . Story reading by the adults — Children who were regularly read to by the parents or the other significant adults showed very good literacy behaviors prior to going to school .
- 2 . Parental modeling — Children with good parental modeling in reading and writing performed better in literacy behaviors . Perhaps , when children see their parents reading newspapers , magazines and books ,and writing down recipes ,list of grocery items and the like ,the preschool -age children realize that reading and writing are important activities ,and a strong desire to read and write is developed .
- 3 . Family outings — Children who had experiences of having family trips and outings had better literacy behaviors . Visiting places like the farm ,the zoo ,the museum ,the park and other interesting places and talking about these could be another great way of developing the children's schemes and literacy at an early age .
- 4 . Verbal interaction with the children — Children who were encouraged to interact with their parents and who were listened to were more confident about their acquired literacy skills . When parents encourage the children to talk about their experiences ,their oral language and their ability to organize their thoughts are developed .
- 5 . Discussion of educational aspirations — Filipino parents put a premium on education ;at an early age ,discussing with the children what they want to be when they grow up is a strong motivation to learn early . This was evident among the children who performed better in this study .
- 6 . Print rich environment — The presence of reading materials such as storybooks , magazines , newspapers ,as well as writing materials which are readily accessible to children influence greatly the acquisition of literacy . Children in this study who had print rich environment had early literacy acquisition .

- 7 . Direct instruction — To some extent ,direct instruction of the child ,like teaching him /her the letters of the alphabet ,and how to write them help a child who is eager to start reading and writing . The children in this study who can identify and write the letters of the alphabet well had direct instruction from the parents and /or older siblings .
- 8 . Time devoted to the children — It greatly helps if the parents ,busy as they are ,allot time regularly to help the preschool-age child by way of reading stories with him /her ,discussing the stories ,pointing the letters in the book ,guiding the child to form correct letter strokes and listening to stories about his/her daily adventures . Parents in this study who attested that they have regular schedule for story reading ,and direct instruction ,as well as time for family outings , had children who performed better in literacy skills .

Family Literacy among the Urban Poor Families

The second research was focused on the family literacy practices of urban poor families that would influence better performance in school . It is a Family Literacy Project which aims to increase the ability of the parents with low educational attainment to provide enriching literacy experiences for their children who are within the ages of attendance in preschool /day care centers to early elementary school so that these children may have greater chances for success in acquiring literacy ,and in school achievement . Morrow ,Tracey and Maxwell (1995) reported the results of several dozen family literacy programs which are consistently positive —from positive attitude change to follow up reports of children s success in school to increased parental participation in school related events .

The subjects of the study are urban parents from a well established non governmental organization that work with urban poor communities and in cooperation with the local government at the barangay (smallest community unit) level . The choice of subjects was based on the following premises :

The parents possess low level of literacy skills .

Their children ,who are living in impoverished ,disadvantaged homes usually are failing in school .

Family Literacy is the framework which aimed to positively impact upon parents and (1) their perception of their roles and abilities in helping their children learn to read and write ;(2) their skills in identifying and providing literacy opportunities in the home ;and (3) their own literacy .

A Rapid Community Assessment (RCA) determined the profile of the parents ,their characteristics , strengths and weaknesses . This was followed by several Focused Group Discussions (FGD) to further assess their academic strengths and needs ,as well as their perceptions of their role in the literacy development of their children . The FGD revealed the following :

- 1 . The parents exert effort to improve the lives of their children through education because : (1) they know that education will give the children opportunities to improve their life ;(2) they want what is best for their children ;and (3) they understand their role as partners in educating their children .
- 2 . The parents want to take advantage of opportunities to improve their literacy in order to help their children better . The comments from them showed this desire :

“ I don t know what to do when my child asks me to help him with his assignment . ”

“ How do I read a story to my child ? ”

“ What should I teach first when my daughter says she wants to learn to read ? ”

“ What will I do first when the teacher of my child says I should follow up my child because he is lagging behind in school ? ”

“ I feel so inferior when the teacher asks me to come for a Parent -Teacher Conference . What should I say ? ”

The results of the Focused Group Discussions plus Individual Interviews led to the development of Training Modules for the parents . Six training modules were prepared :(1) Basic Literacy (2) Basic Numeracy (3) Reading stories to children and discussing these stories (4) Verbal interaction with children

(5) Literacy experiences at home and (6) Conferring with the children's teachers .

- 1 . Basic Literacy Module discusses the steps by which parents can prepare their young children for school ,and help the school-age children with their studies . It starts with the reading readiness phase ;how the parents will prepare the children for reading through oral language development , phonological awareness ,perceptual skills and fine muscle development . It likewise guides them on how to supervise the school-age children in reading and writing .
- 2 . Basic Numeracy Module — Aside from developing literacy ,this research would likewise develop the literacy skills of the parents ,as well as enable them to help their children in learning the basic Math skills .
- 3 . Reading Stories to Children and Story Discussion — The module exposes the parents to the storybooks suitable for reading to their children to develop their love for reading . Then ,there are guides on how to pose questions while reading to them to monitor their children's comprehension and encourage predictions . Likewise ,there are guides on what activities to do after the storyreading activity and what questions to ask the children to develop their critical thinking ability .
- 4 . Verbal Interaction with the Children Module — This module helps the urban poor parents on how to talk with their children ,discussing their everyday activities ,helping the children verbalize their thoughts .
- 5 . Literacy Activities Module — This module helps the parents to include literacy and numeracy activities in their daily chores :reciting nursery rhymes with the child while washing clothes , talking about the recipe being followed as the mother cooks ,talking about the differences among leaves as they plant ,and the like .
- 6 . Conferring with the Child's Teacher during the Parent-Teacher Conference Module — The urban poor parents are usually shy to confer with the teacher of their child . The module teaches them how to confer with the teacher , what questions to ask , how to understand the assessment procedure and how to collaborate to help the child be a more effective learner .

The research is in its second phase :the Training Seminars to the parent participants ,aided by the six training modules . These parents are being observed as they teach their children ,using the modules as their guide . The documentation of these activities through observation and interviews will yield results on their difficulties in teaching their children and the benefits of using the modules . The results will in turn be the basis for further improvement of the training modules . The end product of the research is the assessment of the literacy of children and their academic performance in school through observation ,and use of other authentic assessment techniques .

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Literacy development is a vital part of your child's overall development. It's the foundation for doing well at school, socialising with others, developing independence, managing money and working. But before your child learns to read and write, he needs to develop the building blocks for literacy – the ability to speak, listen, understand, watch and draw. And as your child gets older, she also needs to learn about the connection between letters on a page and spoken sounds. For this to happen, she needs plenty of experience with This particular literacy event is noteworthy in relation to Yoomin's biliteracy development for several reasons. First, singing a hymn in Korean as a choral reading allowed Grandmother, a more fluent reader in Korean, to take the lead so that Yoomin, an emerging reader in Korean, could follow along as her grandmother sang. Second, Yoomin's grandmother provided a page number in English that served as a scaffold for Yoomin to help her find the song in the book. The research on multicultural and multilingual families and children has repeatedly reported that families strongly expect their children both to develop socially recognized linguistic competencies and strategies and to learn their heritage language and cultural ways of interacting (e.g., Lee, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2008).