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Family Literacy: A Short Overview

Family literacy is a new concept that is still little known within educational research. Only recently have scholars gradually trained their sights on the family as a research subject. Unsurprisingly, initial examinations of family literacy programs (e.g., Purcell-Gates 2000; Wasik 2004; 2012) stressed that the level of research is still insufficient. In recent years, however, important insights have been gained through additional reviews and initial meta-studies.

The term “family literacy” is associated with a number of meanings. It was first used by Denny Taylor (1983) to describe the rich and diverse uses of literacy within homes and communities. Today, literacy within the home is referred to as “home literacy” and thus seen as separate from family literacy programs, which address educational activities for families.

Of all the locations where emergent literacy takes place, the family is the most important. The family is “the social group in which the parents’ and the children’s literacies meet, within which they use literacy, develop their literacy, and interact in literacy activities” (Hannon 1995, 103). “Literacy is a part of the very fabric of family life ... [and is] deeply embedded in the social processes of family life” (Taylor 1983, 87). “Children

learn from exploring, observing and taking part in literacy activities at home” (Teale and Sulzby 1986).

Activities such as picture book reading, shared reading, storytelling, language games, children’s rhymes and children’s songs are oral and, at the same time, make children familiar using an oral form with a “new” language (“knowledge of written registers”). These home literacy activities are the expression of an atmosphere of emotional connection between a child and adult as they engage together playfully with language (cf. Hurrelmann 2004). Over the course of the mid-childhood years, i.e., during primary school, reading’s social integration into daily family life takes on a key importance. This integration is characterized by shared reading situations in the family, joint visits to libraries and bookstores, the presence of a shared interest in books, and the time parents spend reading to their children. Empiric findings reveal a close correlation between the literacy environment and school achievement. At the same time, however, literacy activities at home can vary enormously in terms of frequency and quality, with this variability relating to socioeconomic status and ethnic or cultural background. The goal of family literacy programs is to expand home literacy activities.

Historically, programs in the United States that combined parent-child activities and parent training served as the basis for similar developments elsewhere around the world, above all in English-speaking countries. Family-oriented programs can thus be found today in Canada and South Africa as well as in Europe (the UK, Ireland, Malta). In general, these programs have three goals: expanding the frequency and diversity of literacy-related activities in the home environment; improving children’s language and literacy competencies; and expanding parents’ abilities to provide support. A relatively small number of programs also strives to improve parents’ literacy competencies. Family literacy programs are also largely seen as an instrument for expanding social participation. In developed countries, they are therefore mostly found among people of lower socioeconomic status. In Africa and other parts of the world (cf. Desmond and Elfert 2008), family literacy programs are used to support participation in general education, although little evidence-based research exists in those regions.

The concept of family literacy is best understood as an educational strategy, an intergenerational concept that has the potential of playing a key strategic role in the development of literacy (“a bridge to literacy – from generation to generation”). Family literacy programs can serve as an effective gateway to longer-term educational measures and can stimulate other educational processes (Brooks et al. 1996).

Programs are carried out in preschools and schools, as well as in adult education centers, libraries, social centers, churches, synagogues and mosques. They are not subject to a standard definition, but operate within a general framework and can be further developed into a suitable curriculum based on the speci-

fic requirements of each situation. The programs are thus highly varied, in keeping with the notion that “one size does not fit all.” In general, they can be grouped into programs that focus on children (and their parents, as intermediaries) and programs that take the entire family into account.

Effectiveness of Family Literacy Programs

In recent years, an increasing focus has been put on ensuring that family literacy programs are effective. Program descriptions and evaluations have become so numerous that it is now hard to assimilate them all. Although the programs emphasize the structural effectiveness of parent-child programs and present a theoretically convincing string of arguments, their empirical robustness leaves much to be desired given the lack of evaluation, or evaluations that are methodologically weak. In recent years three meta-analyses have attempted to systematically examine the various approaches’ empiric robustness:

		Number of included intervention studies	Number of children involved (N)	Generalized effect
1	Sénéchal and Young (2008)	16	N = 1,340	Cohen’s $d = 0.65^{***}$
2	Manz et al. (2010)	14	N = n.a.	Cohen’s $d = 0.33^{***}$
3	van Steensel et al. (2011)	30	N = 4,326	Cohen’s $d = 0.18^{***}$
	Mol et al. 2010	geared toward a specific literacy format (dialogic reading) and thus not considered here		

In addition, numerous comprehensive individual studies (Anderson et al. 2004; Brooks et al. 1996; Camilleri 2004; Hannon, Morgen and Nutbrown 2006; Phillips, Hayden and Norris 2006; Saint-Laurent and Giasson 2005) exist that were not included in the meta-studies. They have been included in part in the following reviews:

1.	Brooks et al. (2008) Review (16 intervention studies)
2.	Carpentieri et al. (2011) Review (6 meta-studies)
3.	van Steensel et al. (2012) Review (8 meta-studies)

A first examination of the demonstrated effects of the meta-analyses shows that the data are uniformly positive and predominantly significant. It can therefore be asserted that family literacy programs support the development of childhood literacy to non-negligible degree. A more detailed look at the meta-studies shows that this is true for efforts that expand children's language and literacy competencies and those that help parents become better at providing support. The results make clear that family literacy programs have a greater impact than most educational interventions. Something else that becomes clear, however, is the significant variation between the individual studies, which have generalized effect sizes of between $d = 0.18$ and $d = 0.65$. This is primarily ascribed to differences in the programs and their implementation quality (McElvany and van Steensel 2009), including the participating educators' qualifications.

Family Literacy in the Current Discussion

The following debates currently dominate the current discussion of family literacy:

- Family literacy programs stem from a series of assumptions. These include the assumption that no literacy practices exist at all in some families and that such families perpetuate low literacy from generation to generation. This transmission effect has now been documented. It still remains necessary, however, to disprove the idea that there are families with no literacy practices. At the same time, home literacy practices vary considerably based on cultural and social factors.
- One aspect that must be viewed critically is that numerous family literacy programs declare as the norm a form of literacy found among the white middle class. Yet some programs do exist that very consciously address specific cultural conditions, such as programs for aboriginal peoples in Canada.
- Low literacy is a family affair. It affects the entire family and influences how family life takes shape. Intervention programs should therefore consider the whole family. Most intervention programs, however, are geared toward helping parents learn practices that will support their children as the children learn in school. These programs are primarily designed to compensate for deficiencies in children's language and reading development. To that extent, despite the best of intentions, they are focused on shortcomings (Auerbach 1995).
- Many programs do not focus on families' home literacy activities, but attempt to transplant in-school structures to the home environment (cf. Auerbach 1989). In contrast, for the relevant programs, Anderson et al. (2010) calls for considering an authentic literacy, one that is oriented toward each family's practical, everyday

life and that values and supports it. Pahl and Kelly (2005) describe family literacy as a "third space", one that serves as "a bridge between home and school."

- The image of literacy in the family is still characterized by the mother as the main caregiver and (also an element of middle-class life) by shared book reading. On the one hand, literacy takes on different forms in different economic and social environments. On the other, it is imperative that the image of family life be expanded to include men/fathers as well as siblings and grandparents (cf. Gregory 2002). Highly differentiated programs also take day-care providers into account as well as children, to the extent that children support their parents if the latter are low literate or have limited language skills.
- Reaching low-literacy parents is seen as particularly difficult. Many parents with low educational levels do not have a positive attitude toward school and literacy. They will hardly be willing to participate in programs that aim to test and identify their literacy level. It is therefore often better to avoid using terms such as "literacy" or "education." In contrast, informal approaches – such as organizing a coffee hour for parents, issuing a personal oral invitation, or holding joint activities for parents and children – are much more promising. Sometimes it also helps to use unconventional locations (playgrounds, shopping centers, etc.) for such activities. Home-based programs, moreover, might be an effective way to approach some parents.
- The idea that family literacy programs break the cycle of poverty, an idea particularly widespread in the United States, is highly problematic. There is no

empiric evidence to support this assertion. Above all, however, it tends to diminish efforts designed to address the causes of social inequalities. Poverty does not result from low literacy, but is the consequence of complex social conditions – which must be redressed.

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