Learning about literacy: Social factors and reading acquisition

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Introduction

Parents are the major socializing force in most young children’s lives, although siblings and peers, as well as preschool teachers, are involved in this process as well. These individuals also play an important role in the engagement of young children in literacy events. Interactions between children and adults are seen as “the primary medium by which literacy is acquired” (Pianta, 2004, p. 175). Interactions with others around print (Purcell-Gates, 1996), as well as general talk about events not present (i.e., engagement in decontextualized language) (Snow, 1991) have been shown to play key roles in children’s literacy development. Interactions around print can take many forms. Perhaps the most studied parent-child interaction around print involves storybook reading. Storybook reading has been shown to support young children’s language development as well as some later literacy skills (Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998).

Multiple factors relate to the quality and quantity of parental interactions with their children around literacy events. For example, cultural factors have been shown to relate to parents’ engagement with children in literacy events (McNaughton, 2006). In addition, socio-economic factors have been associated with children’s literacy knowledge. It is widely known that children from low socio-economic status (SES) families achieve less in school-based reading and writing (Askov, 2004; Juel, 2006). Children attending schools with a greater population of families of low SES backgrounds may be less successful in literacy learning (Snow, Burns, & Griffith, 1998). This finding has led to the suggestion that differences between the home and school environment may be responsible for the degree of risk associated with literacy development. Other evidence, however, indicates that activities engaged in by parents, together with the overall quality of the home learning environment, can override social class factors (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2000).

Key Research Questions

1. How do parent-child interactions support children’s reading acquisition before formal schooling?
2. What are some of the key social processes that affect children’s reading acquisition?
3. What are some of the ways parents and schools can support children’s reading acquisition in families from low SES backgrounds?
Recent Research Results

**Parent-child activities that support reading acquisition**

Early reading acquisition is strongly related to young children’s phonological sensitivity (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000). In addition, it has been claimed that children’s knowledge of the alphabet at the beginning of formal schooling is one of the best predictors of school reading achievement (Adams, 1990). Lonigan, Dyer, and Anthony (1996) found that children’s increased knowledge of phonological sensitivity was related to parental involvement in literacy activities in the home, such as the frequency of parents reading for pleasure. It has also been claimed that young children learn these skills (i.e., letters of the alphabet, phonemic awareness) by observing and participating in different print literacy activities that are an important part of their own communities (Purcell-Gates, 2004). The frequency of children’s experiences with genres of literacy in their environment, such as shared book reading or parents reading newspapers in the child’s presence, as well as oral language use (mealtime conversations, true story telling), related to children’s language and literacy development in the early grades (Leseman & van Tuijl, 2006). This suggests the importance of these early experiences for children’s school literacy achievement.

**Key social processes**

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that learning is enhanced when interacting with a more knowledgeable other. As part of social-constructivist theory, parents scaffold or assist children’s performance by modeling the types of responses expected to particular questions with the goal that children will eventually respond using such responses themselves. This pattern is often noticeable in storybook sharing. Parents also support children’s understanding of text by rephrasing and explaining the text meaning and sequence of events. Older siblings of young children sometimes assume responsibility for reading to children, which exposes young children to a function of print, new vocabulary, as well as question-answer patterns children will often experience in early schooling (Gregory, 2001; Rogoff, 1998).

Social resources, including the quality of the parent-child relationship, are important for children’s literacy development (Wasik, 2004). Bus, Belsky, van IJzendoorn, and Crnic (1997) found that the quality of interactions in storybook reading between mother and child was dependent on the security of the parent-child relationship. That is, high quality book reading (such as initiating interactions around the meaning of pictures or text) depended on the interactional context where less secure relationships between parent and child resulted in fewer meaningful interactions. Furthermore, parents who themselves do not read frequently are less likely to initiate conversations to make texts enjoyable or to find ways of making them comprehensible for young readers (Bus, Leseman, & Keultjes, 2000).

Parents’ beliefs about literacy development also play an important role in the socialization of children into literacy (McNaughton, 2006). Parents hold many ideas about how children learn to read (Evans, Shaw, Moretti, & Bell, 2001) that may be influenced by how they learned to read themselves. Some parents have explicit developmental views about children’s literacy development, for example, that children
will learn to write their name before they attend school, engage in interactions with storybooks, or write the alphabet and understand the spacing of letters on a page (McNaughton, Kempton, & Turoa, 1994). Others develop more readiness views of early literacy in that children will learn to read and to write when they are ready, often when they attend school. When educators have particular expectations for children’s literacy knowledge at school entry, difficulties can arise due to conflicting views of literacy and ideas about child rearing in general (Powell, Okagaki, & Bojczyk, 2003). It is important for educators to ask parents’ about their literacy beliefs. Parents who are dismissed as not being interested in their children’s literacy development because they do not engage with their children in activities promoted by educators, may not understand why certain types of activities are important for children’s school-based literacy development (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro, 2006). Children’s literacy development can be supported when cultural differences are considered and when adaptations to teaching are incorporated.

Current research has demonstrated academic advantages for those children who attended preschool in contrast to those in other early care settings (Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007). Research has shown that preschool classroom environments vary widely in the amount of reading materials and the engagement with them. The availability of print resources can serve to promote children’s literacy behaviors in addition to instructional use of the materials by teachers (Farran, Aydogan, Kang, & Lipsey, 2006). Children engage in literacy activities with peers and receive instruction and modeling from early educators. Early educators most knowledgeable of early literacy development, such as knowledge of teaching letter-sound correspondence, are able to model literacy events that are both meaningful and enjoyable for young children.

It is important for early educators to ask parents about the types of reading and writing activities they may be engaging in at home. Many low-income parents underestimate the amount of reading and writing they are involved in as part of their daily lives (Lynch, in press), which provides a model for children of print use in the home literacy environment. It must be noted as well, that unlike many parents from low SES groups, many middle-class parents have the opportunity to converse with other professionals such as teachers, and these professionals may help to shape the parent-child interactions in literacy events (Lareau, 2002). Therefore, parent-teacher communication is an important factor to consider in young children’s reading development.

**Reading acquisition in families from low SES backgrounds**

Access to books is an environmental factor strongly related to children’s literacy development (DeTemple, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Differences in the accessibility to books in the home have been noted among families from low and middle-class families (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Nevertheless, there are many other forms of print that can support children’s literacy development. Research by Purcell-Gates (1996) and Lynch (in press) on the types and functions of print materials in the homes of low-income families revealed that many children have diverse experiences with print beyond storybooks that can contribute to their early literacy knowledge, such as reading/writing the alphabet, message reading, and interactions around functional print in the lives of their families. However, Purcell-Gates’ (1996) research showed that
children’s early literacy development related to parents’ engagement in specific types of print literacy activities, particularly those with more complex levels of discourse for leisure and entertainment. Book reading would be considered more complex because its linguistic structure is more written than oral in form (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1986).

Vocabulary development is important for children’s reading acquisition, particularly in relation to children’s reading comprehension. It has been suggested that children from low SES families are engaged in conversation about things not happening at present (i.e., decontextualized language) with adults to a lesser extent than do middle-class children (Tudge, Odero, Hogan, & Etz, 2003). Differences have also been found in the vocabulary used by low SES groups and for those from middle and high SES backgrounds (Hart & Risley, 1995), in that children from low SES groups heard less varied vocabulary words. Many of these children have been exposed to various forms of language use in their environments. However, differences exist between home language use and academic language in schools (Leseman & van Tuijl, 2006), including an increase in the use of rare vocabulary. Parents can be encouraged to use more rare vocabulary in their everyday interactions with young children.

Play is an important part of young children’s development (Morrow & Schickedanz, 2006). The play environment is important for helping to support children’s reading acquisition. It has been found that parents’ use of more complex words when engaging in play with their children accounted for 40% of the variance in vocabulary skills in both kindergarten and second grade (Weizman & Snow, 2001). Play that incorporates literacy-rich materials seems to contribute to print knowledge and oral language development (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Children’s engagement with materials was higher in preschool classrooms with a strong literacy-related physical environment (Farran et al., 2006).

**Future Directions**

There is a need for further research on the types of reading activities that occur among low-income families in the out-of-school environment so that instruction and recommendations can occur in relation to what parents already do around literacy in their daily lives. There is a need to identify the types of activities we should be encouraging in the home. Intervention literacy programs can add to the range of activities already involved in by parents (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). There is also a need for finding out how to build on out-of-school literacy activities in children’s early education.

There are barriers to implementing literacy interventions once their need have been identified. Factors such as, babysitter costs to watch over younger siblings, prevent some families from attending family literacy programs or attending sessions with classroom teachers about children’s literacy development. Teacher release time to work with parents (and an assistant to watch over other children) can assist in the establishment of home-school literacy partnerships. Administration support is critical. Such support proved beneficial in home-school connections (Steiner, 2007).
Preschool teachers must be well-versed in order to be partners in affecting children’s early language and literacy experiences. In addition to providing writing materials and books, preschool teachers should have knowledge of early literacy development (Wasik, 2004). Further research is needed on preschool teachers’ early literacy knowledge because of the significant amount of time early childhood educators spend with young children. Parents often want recommendations on how to support their children in early literacy events and preschool teachers play a key role in providing and demonstrating this knowledge. Furthermore, preschool teachers who are aware of home literacy practices and materials can incorporate these into preschool activities.

Conclusions

There are many social factors that relate to children’s reading acquisition. Parents play a key role in this socialization process. Because some family practices are more developmentally linked with school practices than others, families’ engagement in specific activities may enhance the development of aspects of conventional literacy (Heath, 1983). When educating parents about school-based literacy practices, it is important that educators understand the beliefs and practices that parents bring to new learning situations that are shaped by their social and cultural environment. If not, educators’ attempts to support parents in children’s literacy development may not be effective (e.g., Janes & Kermani, 2001).

Engaging in early literacy activities should be a positive experience for parents and children. When such is not the case, it is important for educators to rethink their approach to supporting parents and children in literacy events. Furthermore, educators cannot allow differences in children’s knowledge that they bring to school serve as an excuse not to teach reading effectively (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Some children may require extra support than do others in their literacy development. In addition, many researchers would argue that there needs to be more incorporation of literacy practices from diverse homes and communities within schools to support children’s literacy development (e.g., Hull & Shultz, 2001; McNaughton, 2001).

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References


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