Reading, parents and family literacy

Susan Hill, University of South Australia, Susan.hill@unisa.edu.au
Alexandra Diamond, University of South Australia, Alexandra.diamond@unisa.edu.au

Abstract

This paper identifies and compares the learning experiences of parents and carers in a range of family literacy programs in low income areas and designed for families of children aged 0-8 years. The paper focuses on three family literacy programs developed with two goals: first to encourage parents' involvement in their children's education and second for parents to aspire to participate in forms of higher education. The three family literacy programs were designed to offer another opportunity for early school leavers to reconnect with schools and learning in positive ways around their young children's literacy experiences as for some parents relearning with their children may generate positive relationships between schools and reading. The three innovative approaches to family literacy are the: Dads' program in a children's centre, Lap-Sit, an out-reach program from a public library and OLA, a play based early years of school program targeting children's oral language and comprehension. Student teachers from the university participated in the three family literacy programs and were involved in conducting, documenting and analysing the programs. This paper will describe the programs and then analyse the different family literacy programs by employing a multi-categorical framework to explore the different learning experiences of parents and carers. The analysis explores the issues the programs addressed and the program goals, the pedagogy, resources used, partnerships and the forms of literacy practices within the diverse family literacy programs. The paper stresses the importance of playfulness and home school connections in family literacy programs.

Key Words: Early childhood, family literacy, parents, fathers, aspirations

Background

This paper identifies and compares the learning experiences of parents and carers in three diverse family literacy programs, conducted in low socioeconomic areas in South Australia. The family programs were designed for families with children aged birth to 3 years, 3-5 years and 5-8 years of age. The three programs will be described and the differing pedagogies, focus, literacy practices, partnerships and resources will be analysed. Family literacy programs encourage parent involvement in education with benefits for parents, and their children who tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and go on to pursue higher education (Daniel, 2011).

An increasing number of family literacy programs have been developed in low socioeconomic areas with low literacy levels and these programs are being sponsored by a variety of funding bodies. Some family literacy programs have been developed by government departments in early childhood centres and schools (Booth, Croll, Davis, Lewis, Stock & Wise, 2007), other programs have been developed by libraries in local council areas, and there are large scale family literacy initiatives developed and supported by non-government agencies such as the Smith Family and the Brotherhood of St Laurence for example HIPPY (Gilley, 2003) and Let's Read (Goldfeld, Napiza, Quach, Reilly, Ukoumunne, & Wake, 2011). Family literacy programs operate from a variety of theoretical frameworks (Hill,1997) and range from direct instruction of parents on how to read to young children to socio-cultural and transformative approaches to home and school learning (Gregory, 2005). While there are a multitude of family literacy programs and funding bodies, the theoretical foundations and pedagogy of family literacy programs remains under developed and research into many aspects of parental involvement in education is incomplete (Daniel, 2011).

Reading, Families and Early Language Development

Many early childhood family literacy programs focus on the importance of rich language interactions when adults share a book with young children (DeBruin-Parecki, 2009). Schickedanz and McGee (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of studies investigating shared reading interventions and found multiple values in shared book reading with babies, toddlers and three year olds as a means for increasing child talk and for supporting children's understanding of meaning, vocabulary and syntactic development. Research into shared book reading has consistently shown positive impacts on young children's acquisition of a range of important early language, literacy skills and interaction skills (Roberts, 2008; Wasik et al., 2006; Stadler & Ward, 2005; Bus et al., 1995). Shared book reading has importance because everyday spoken language has fewer rare words compared to the rare words that occur in books read aloud, and shared storybook reading enables children to engage with the more complex syntax of written language (Hill & Launder, 2010). Hayes and Ahrens (1988) state that the lexical input from conversations are a limited source for learning

Paper Code: 00622

new words outside of the most common terms. The rich language experiences associated with shared book reading in the years before school are particularly vital for children who experience developmental risks, including poverty and/or disability (Moody, Justice & Cabell, 2010). While books are a prompt for rich oral language interactions it is the playful talk, melding, blending and syncretising home language, book language and the language of school which enhances oral language development (Gregory, 2005)

Interest in early brain and language development has prompted an increase in the number of family literacy programs conducted with families of babies, infants and toddlers. For example, Saracho and Spodek (2010) in an international review of family literacy programs report on a study by Hardman and Jones (1999) where 40 parents of seven-month olds were provided with book packets containing books, literacy information and library cards. The researchers met with parents every second week for two months, focusing on shared book reading, rhymes and songs. At the end of two months the children had access to more books, parents looked more at books with their babies, and babies had more 'reaching for book' behaviours (Saracho & Spodek, 2010, p. 1383). In contrast, in a study of the British Bookstart program, where parents receive a newborn book pack there was a subset of 'less active' reading families who showed an increase in the frequency of shared reading and an increase in library membership. Receiving the book pack appeared to have most impact on those families who did not often engage in shared reading with their baby or toddler, seemingly 'reminding them of its importance and provid[ing] them with the resources to act on this knowledge' (Bookstart National Impact Evaluation, 2009, p. 24).

Recent Australian research into parents' engagement with early childhood development (MCEECDYA, 2010) revealed that more than a quarter of parents were unaware of the importance of reading to very young children. Fathers were less aware of the importance of reading to infants than other parent groups. Reviews of research examining gender difference in literacy have emphasized that early literacy experiences differ by gender at home (Pancsofar, Vernon-Feagans & The Family Life Project Investigators, 2010; Gambell & Hunter, 1999; Harper & Pelletier, 2008). In a survey of families Burgess (2011) found almost 67% of children 'never' or 'almost never' saw their father read. In this study 51% of mothers read for pleasure (any material) almost daily whereas only 36.6% of fathers read any material for pleasure every day. Duursma and Pan (2010) explored the book reading practices of 800 low income families with 1-3 years old children and found that parents with higher education levels and daughters are more likely to be families with both parents reading (with higher father involvement). In comparison, in families where only mothers read frequently, parents had lower education levels and sons. Interestingly research with Aboriginal families found that fathers did the reading with young children while the mothers were engaged in other domestic tasks (Hill, Colbung & Glover, 2011).

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In Australia there is increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in families and this has prompted a need to explore culturally responsive and innovative ways to engage family involvement in education. There is a need for more culturally responsive research methods and the need for more research into family literacy interventions for low SES, ethnic-linguistically diverse families of young children (Manz, Hughes, Barnabas & Bracaliello, 2010). Also, when focussing on ethnically and linguistically diverse families, other factors such as socioeconomic status and the education level of parents impact on the parents' reading practices with their children (Duursma & Pan, 2010).

Three Family Literacy Programs

This paper now explores three different family literacy programs developed within a larger project which explored educational aspirations. The three family literacy programs are the Dads'program, Lap-Sit family literacy through a public library, and OLA, an oral language school based program. The family literacy programs took place in communities that are designated as culturally and linguistically diverse with predominantly low-income families and each program was developed with teacher education students. The family programs responded to local issues in the community identified by a children's centre, library and a school. The program developers were involved in an action research project that documented the development of the program as it changed in response to the participants at the various settings.

The family programs will be described in small case studies which were constructed from the action research projects of the program developers. The family literacy programs will be analysed to explore the learning experiences of the families involved. The analysis will employ a multi-categorical framework synthesised from several sources (Hindman, Connor, Jewkes & Morrison, 2008; Nickse, 1991; Purton & Gadsby, 2002; Skage, 2002). Analysis will focus on the issue the program addressed, pedagogy, the focus, personnel, the forms of literacy practices, resources and the different forms of partnerships and inclusivity implicit within the diverse family literacy programs.

Table 1. Categories for analysis of the three family literacy programs

Category	Description
Issue addressed	Home/school transition, developing oral language, developing concepts of print, adult- child language interactions, English language
Pedagogy	development, parent confidence in educational involvement theoretical approach: direct / explicit instruction, or indirect / implicit / scaffolded / modelled
Focus	adult, child or both; mothers only or all caregivers, children's age group
Access	targeted or universal
Personnel	recruitment, training, support
Resources	online, concrete; free or purchasable
Literacy practices	book literacy, digital literacy, emergent writing, oral language (e.g. phonemic awareness, pragmatics, vocabulary)
Inclusivity	culturally appropriate texts, use of community languages, recognition of diverse family and household types, disability issues covered
Partnership	involvement of community/clients in design and/or evaluation of program

Dad's Program

The staff at the children's centre decided to target fathers to promote more nurturing connections between fathers and children and to communicate the importance of fathers' roles in literacy development. The staff completed an audit of 'male-friendly' images at the centre and made several changes to be more welcoming to fathers. The staff wanted to increase fathers' confidence in educational involvement with their children's literacy development. The staff developed a family literacy program based on hands-on activities to build and fly kites and to construct box cars in connection with a national car racing event soon to be held in the area. The Dads' program was held on Saturday mornings, to avoid any inference that fathers were underemployed or unemployed during the week. Three hands-on literacy activity sessions were held and teacher education students participated in the sessions as and documented the events. Fourteen dads attended the first session, twenty-two dads went to the second, and over thirty attended the third session. Food in the form of a BBQ encouraged fathers to attend, an informal environment for families to feel confident and comfortable was created. The fathers were active literacy partners with their children as they engaged in activities such as constructing and then flying kites and making box cars. Kite flying particularly appealed to the Indian fathers who identified and related to this experience from their own childhoods. An additional event was held at night allowing children and families to mingle and enjoy the moment with extended families where uncles, cousins, older siblings and grandparents were invited.

The staff decided on the structure of the Dads' family literacy sessions and this involved a hands-on activity, singing and book reading related to the topic. Finding books on the topics that would interest the young children and their dads was challenging and the only kite flying book staff could find was *Grug and his kite.* Many photographs were taken to provide a record of the activities and to create a digital book recording the events. The staff planned recruitment to the program carefully, designed Dad-friendly leaflets and had frequent dialogue with parents at drop off and pick up time which was essential to encourage fathers to attend the sessions. One mother confronted the director and strongly demanded she stop putting leaflets advertising dad-child literacy sessions in her child's bag or she would put them in the bin. The mother reported that the child's dad would not come to the sessions and the leaflets made him uncomfortable. The director answered that the father would be welcome but it was up to him. The father did attend the sessions and he informed the director of his educational aspirations for his son saying that he went to lots of different schools and had never learned to read. To get respect and attention he used to beat up and pick on other kids. 'I don't want that sort of life for my boy,' he said. 'That's why I'm here. I want to help him'.

The fathers were involved in an evaluation survey of the effectiveness of the program and provided feedback to the program developers. Families were not formally involved in the design of

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the program. In this program fathers were engaged in talking, playing and reading as they built kites and box cars. The design of the program led to high attendance of fathers at the three activity based literacy sessions and demonstrated that the program was popular and engaged the community.

Lap-Sit Program

The Lap-Sit family literacy program targeted young mothers with children from birth to three years of age and was held in a community house removed from preschools, schools and libraries. Transport remains an issue in the community as many parents with very young children are dependent on public transport and do not have easy access to the local library. The Lap-Sit program was designed as an outreach program from a public library and organised by a library staff member who was designated as a community worker-family literacy. In this particular community a high percentage of children are recognized as developmentally vulnerable or developmentally at risk in terms of language and cognitive development according to recent AEDI results. This program focused on modelling and scaffolding rich language experiences associated with shared book reading, playing and singing with babies and toddlers.

The Lap-Sit program used library constructed kit-boxes with copies of materials for all the participants, for example there were nine copies of a book, laminated copies of songs, and other language stimuli such as finger puppets and play objects based on the kit-box topic. The topics were *Getting Dressed, Out and About, Baby's World, Sound and Noise* and *Touch and Feel*. The student teachers involved in the program received training from the library staff on how to implement the program and then delivered the Lap-Sit program over four weeks during a four week practicum. The student teachers also mentored a parent/group coordinator to ensure the program continued after the four weeks.

The Lap-Sit facilitators, student teachers in this case, modelled appropriate shared storybook reading techniques based on dialogic reading which has been found to be most effective with 2-3 year old children compared with older children (Mol, Bus, Jong, & Smeets, 2008). The program also emphasised ways to sing songs and nursery rhymes and to play and talk with babies and young children. The program was relaxed, playful and entertaining. Interestingly, a student teacher commented that sometimes the mothers talked amongst themselves, implying the sessions were an entertainment for the babies and toddlers, rather than the intended parent and child interaction with talk around books and songs.

The library staff member documented the program and needed to collect evidence of the program's effectiveness and possible improvements. It was decided to gather information on the young children's vocabulary at the beginning and at the conclusion of the program. Attention to vocabulary growth was important for a number of reasons: to compare children's vocabulary

against normed age equivalent samples and to explore language development during the time the Lap-Sit program was conducted. However, while attempting to gather data before and after the program it was found that almost half of the families had moved house or were unavailable by the end of the program. This highlighted the transience of young parents with very young children in this low socioeconomic area. Further evaluation of the program included a survey where it was found the families had very low rates of library membership and two to four books in the home. This program was conducted over a short period of time and raised many issues, including staffing, transport and sustainability and the length of the program. This also highlighted the importance of mentoring local Lap-Sit leaders to build expertise within the local community.

OLA Oral Language Program

The OLA oral language program took place in a school serving families with diverse cultural and linguistic heritage. The program had three parts: a play based program with props and books for dramatic play, a series of parent workshops on school based approaches to teaching reading and home learning stories to promote children's oral retellings of the cultural history of their families.

At first the teachers decided that a play-based program would be a developmentally appropriate and intrinsically motivating approach for children to experiment with oral language and to get immediate feedback. It was thought that oral language development in context would produce more robust oral language development, rather than a series of isolated vocabulary, grammar and phonological awareness drills. Also when children engage in symbolic play or pretend play activities this encourages sustained symbolic thinking, use of narrative language and oral language to inform, hypothesize and imagine (Dickinson, Darrow & Tinubu, 2008). It was thought that the use of language in context through play activities would lead to purposeful talk and to increase vocabulary relevant picture books were provided and read aloud (Hill & Launder, 2010). The play based program consisted of ten play boxes made up of play props and related books, for example a doctors' surgery, restaurant and an animal farm. The teachers and several parents engaged in the play activities to introduce new vocabulary, read books and used specific prompts to extend the children's oral language. Later, a series of family literacy workshops were developed to share the teaching strategies employed in the early years of school, such extending children's vocabulary, listening comprehension and teaching reading. Several teacher education students presented the family literacy workshops for parents. It was thought that families could best support their children's literacy development at home if parents and teachers used the same teaching strategies. The workshops were designed so that parents could make take-home materials for teaching early literacy.

The OLA oral language program evolved in response to the cultural and linguistic diversity in the community by adding and modifying components. First the play boxes encouraged the development of oral language in context, next the parent workshops involved parents making materials to synchronise school-home literacy strategies and finally the last component, 'home learning stories' were added. The home learning stories involved families constructing photographic stories about their cultural heritage, their extended family members and family celebrations. The family learning stories were complied into big books for each classroom and this enabled children to use the big books to retell stories about their family heritage.

Evaluation of the project included data collected on children's oral language, vocabulary and reading development using a range of standardised assessment procedures. The teachers documented the development of the three approaches to the OLA program and particularly highlighted the benefits of the home learning stories which were constructed at home and brought to school for children to share. The home learning stories were a treasured resource by the children and generated rich oral language conversations which the teachers could use to assess and extend the children's language development in meaningful context. The teachers commented that through the OLA program many families had developed relationships with the other parents and the parents had noted improvement in their children's reading due to family literacy materials used at home. Overall the parents' confidence and connection with the school community improved.

The paper now explores the different elements of the programs in particular the issues the programs addressed, pedagogy and different literacy practices, resources and home –school partnerships.

Analysis of the Three Family Literacy Programs
Table 2. Three programs in relation to categories of analysis

Categories of analysis	Dads' program: children's centre	Lap-Sit: library outreach in community	OLA-oral language program: school
Issue addressed	Building fathers' confidence in involvement in education.	Children's vocabulary development and access to books.	Oral language development English language development.
Pedagogy	Activity based learning.	Direct instruction and modelling of shared book reading.	Play based activity, activity based parent information sessions, socio-cultural home learning stories.
Focus	Dads and children aged 3-5 years are involved.	Parents, caregivers and children birth to three.	Families with English as a second language. Children aged 5-6 years.
Access	Targeted Dads, low income and ESL.	Low income families with low education levels.	Targeting ESL families of children in the first year of school.
Personnel	Centre staff and student-teachers.	Library community worker and student-teachers.	School staff and teacher education students.
Resources	Construction activities (e.g. kite making) books, digital cameras.	Kit with copies of books, puppets, plus CDs of songs and rhymes.	Play boxes, reading materials, home learning stories.
Literacy practices	An activity (e.g. kite making). Book literacy and oral language vocabulary.	Shared book reading, puppets, songs and nursery rhymes.	Play based oral language. Documentation of learning stories with photos and text created by families.
Inclusivity	Targeting fathers. English focus.	Themed kits have a universal theme. English focus.	Focussing on diverse families. English focus.
Partnership	Parents not involved in program design. Involved in the evaluation.	Parents not involved in program design. Involved in the evaluation.	Parents are not involved in the design of the program. Involved in the evaluation.

Discussion

The three different family literacy programs focussed on children from birth to three, three to five and five to eight years. Each program had the goals of encouraging parental involvement with their children's literacy development and also for parents to aspire to future learning in higher education. The case studies demonstrated that parents in low socioeconomic areas held positive aspirations for their children's literacy development and later success in school. The parents' eagerness to support their children was demonstrated by their attendance at the various family

literacy programs. This high parental aspiration for their children's success in school is supported by a large longitudinal study by (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) who found that many low socioeconomic families have very high aspirations for their children 'to succeed against the odds' (p.463). Whether the parents themselves will continue on to engage in higher education was not evident in the short time line of the projects, however all family literacy programs noted that the parents showed increased self confidence about their involvement in education. The mentoring of local workshop leaders in the Lap-Sit program was an important start to building confidence and leadership capacity in the community.

The three family literacy programs responded to different issues: involving fathers, teaching techniques of shared book reading and language play and developing children's oral language. The programs employed a range of pedagogy, resources, and literacy practices. Families were not involved in the initial design of the programs although families contributed program resources such as the home learning stories. With reference to Bourdieu (1984) and the social and cultural capital in communities, the home learning stories were a powerful means for families to make use of their cultural capital which in turn informed the school of untapped resources in the community. The home learning stories and the Dads' program made use of the social and cultural resources in the community and in doing so these family-school partnerships become both a socially and an academically significant practice. When schools, children's centres and libraries included families' socio-cultural capital the children's engagement in learning increases and outcomes improve (Daniel, 2011).

One of the advantages of this study was the use of action research methodology which enabled the program developers to develop and document the adjustments and changes in the family literacy program in response to community need. The study also involved teacher education students who aided the implementation of the programs and this was an important benefit for the students' future work in diverse communities. The limitations of the study included the short time line for the action research projects. Perhaps a further limitation was that family literacy projects tended to focussed on the children's literacy development and not the possible benefits to parents in terms of confidence, engagement and aspirations for their own learning. The outcomes for parents and their own aspirations for further learning and involvement in education is an important area for further research.

Underlying all the family programs was an element of 'playful talk'. Gregory (2005) describes the importance of 'playful talk' in bridging home and school discourses. In the Dads' program everyone talked about ways to make kites and box cars. The Lap-Sit program focussed on talk about books, puppet plays, songs and rhymes. The OLA school program targeted talk because of the link between oral language and later reading comprehension. All the programs were talk-based, including ways to talk about books, and ways to understand sounds of speech in

rhymes and songs and talk within dramatic play. In addition all the programs incorporated elements of play; in word play, thematic play and in the play activity with fathers. These playful family literacy programs provided opportunities for families and teachers to talk and playfully engage with forms of oral language and in doing so, to understand that language—whether school-like or home-like—is an object which can be explored.

*The authors wish to thank the useful feedback from reviewers of this paper.

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