

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Building Meaningful Partnerships with Families to Promote Early Literacy Development: Implications for Practitioners

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This research to practice paper summarizes the findings of a study that sought to understand Head Start families' existing beliefs and practices about early literacy. Guided by the "funds of knowledge" perspective (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), this approach views families as resourceful, competent, and essential partners in their child's learning. Families were asked to complete The Family Literacy Survey, which included Likert scale-items and open-ended questions. The findings found that while families' valued early literacy learning, they reported few home activities related to children's specific early literacy skills (i.e., writing the child's name, learning letter sounds), instead relying on the Head Start program to address the development of these skills. Practical implications are detailed including supporting families' knowledge of early literacy and building on their existing literacy practices.

*Keywords:* family partnerships, beliefs, early literacy development, Head Start

A young child's family, community, and culture provide an important setting for early literacy development as they begin to communicate with others, explore ways of using text, and find enjoyment in reading books with others. Upon entering early education settings like Head Start, there is evidence that partnerships between school and home can positively support young children's development in many areas, including literacy development (e.g., Darling & Westberg, 2004; Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011). In turn, bridging learning between the home and classroom is viewed as an essential component of best practices in high-quality early education (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; DEC, 2010; NAEYC, 2009).

Some approaches to building partnerships with families focus on assessing perceived deficits in a family's home literacy practices (e.g. lack of books, limited writing of text) and then training families to replicate school-like early literacy activities in the home to address the family's alleged shortcomings. These attempts often do not acknowledge the existing literacy practices within the home and may undermine families' confidence in their own ability to

support their child's learning (e.g. Auerbach, 1995; Denessen, 2007; McNaughton, 2006; Ordonez-Jasis, 2010; Rodriguez-Brown, 2010). An important alternative to building family partnerships begins by seeking to understand the family and community context of the child with the intent to build from already evident capacities within them (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; McNaughton, 2006). Termed "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), this perspective assumes that families are competent, resourceful, and have gained meaningful knowledge from their own unique life experiences. An important beginning to this approach is to understand families' beliefs and practices about literacy and use this to help building partnerships with families (Bingham, 2007).

## OUR STUDY

We asked families within a rural, Midwestern Head Start program to report their early literacy beliefs and practices using The Family Early Literacy Survey. This instrument included Likert scale items, revised from a previously used tool (Approaches to Beginning Reading and Reading Instruction; Evans et al., 2004; Evans, Barraball, & Eberlee, 1998). The items asked family participants to rate the importance of different early literacy activities, goals, and strategies. The survey also included open-ended questions, which sought to uncover the "literacy stories" of a family (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999), inquiring about the family's daily routines that include literacy, personal experiences acquiring literacy, and expectations about their child's early literacy development while in the Head Start program. Families were invited to complete the surveys at the Head Start centers during an already scheduled family activity. The survey was also sent home in children's backpacks in an effort to achieve full program participation..

Of the 269 eligible families in the program, participants from 213 families completed the survey, representing an 89% response rate. Survey participants were primarily mothers under the age of under the age of 30 who were Caucasian and English speaking. Most family respondents had a high school degree or a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and nearly half of the family participants did not work outside the home.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Families Early Literacy Beliefs

The Likert scale items within The Family Early Literacy Survey examined what families' believed was important preschool early literacy learning. Analysis revealed two distinct factors, or groupings of items, based on the family participants' responses. Factor one was composed of items related to specific early literacy skills, such as sounding out letters to read new words, hearing different sounds in words (phonological awareness), and practicing to immediately recognize words (i.e., sight words). Factor two included items about common strategies to support early literacy such as encouraging children's confidence in guessing words, attempting to write themselves, and developing broad reading interests. Family members rated Factor 2 (early literacy strategies) items significantly higher in importance compared to Factor 1 (specific early literacy skills).

## Families Early Literacy Practices

The first three open-ended questions focused on family practices related to supporting children's early literacy development. The first question asked families to explain how reading, writing, and/or communicating were used in their homes during a typical day. Almost all of the literacy activities described were those completed with, or by, their child. Adult literacy activities were seldom mentioned. Most commonly respondents described reading with their child or completing homework together. Few responses described activities supporting children's specific early literacy skills.

The second question asked family members to identify what they viewed as the most important things they did to support their child in learning to read, write, and communicate. The most common responses included reading together or a writing-related activity (e.g. painting, coloring, drawing). Less than a third of responses focused on a specific early literacy skill such as helping their child learn letter sounds. A fifth of the responses did not identify activities related to literacy and instead described general caregiving behaviors such as providing encouragement and spending time with the child.

The third question asked family members about their own experiences learning to read and write. Over a quarter recalled negative experiences. Further, it was common for family members to be identified as helping them learn rather than teachers or school.

## Families' Expectations About Early Literacy Learning in Head Start

A fourth open-ended question asked families to share their expectations about what Head Start should do to support children's early literacy. The majority of responses identified specific literacy skills including recognizing the alphabet, recognizing and writing their names, sounding out letters and words, and word recognition as the responsibility of the program..

## Implications for Practice

### Valuing Early Literacy Development

The Family Literacy Survey findings demonstrate that families value early literacy development as important for their children. Likert scale items were consistently rated as very important and open-ended responses detailed support for early literacy within the homes. This is an important finding in itself as both families and Head Start value the importance of early literacy development. It is clear that families and the program share common ground from which to build partnerships that support children's early literacy development.

### Supporting Families' Understanding of Early Literacy Skills

Family members did not rate specific early literacy skill items as highly on the Likert scale questions as they did items describing literacy strategies. Similarly, in the open-ended questions

family members described using general literacy strategies such as reading with children in their home but they did not describe activities that supported specific early literacy skill development. It may be that families do not report activities to support early literacy skill because they do not see it as developmentally appropriate given their child's age as a preschooler. However, it may also indicate that families are unsure what early literacy development entails and what they could do to support this type of learning.

Head Start programs may consider providing families with information about the multi-faceted nature of early literacy development. It is important to help families understand that helping children acquire literacy involves more than reading stories with children or learning alphabet letters. In providing this information, sensitivity is needed as families may have had negative experiences in their own experiences and may continue to struggle with some literacy uses. Providing families with ideas to support children's early literacy should emphasize the essential role that family plays in a child's development, detail the multi-faceted literacy skills to be acquired in a clear and accessible way, and include many examples.

### Developing Supports Which Draw on Families' Existing Funds of Knowledge

Utilizing a funds of knowledge approach wherein family strengths and capabilities are the focus (rather than deficits), it becomes apparent that there are meaningful ways for families and practitioners to begin working together. For example, many family respondents described the importance of encouraging their child, reading together each night, and engaging in efforts to talk with their children. Validating these practices and sharing how interactions during this time can support specific skill development is important. This could include modeling how interactive discussions during book reading can build vocabulary and comprehension and providing examples of how phonological awareness (e.g. syllables, rhyming, onset-rime) can be integrated within a book reading or discussions.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the early literacy beliefs and practices of families with children in a rural Midwestern Head Start program. The results of the Family Early Literacy Survey, collected from a large majority of the families in the program, provide important insights into building bridges between a Head Start and families. In finding that families' valued early literacy development and already engaged in a variety of different literacy-rich activities within their home (e.g. book reading, homework), a positive beginning place for this partnership is apparent. Further, in seeking to build families' knowledge and confidence about their child's early literacy skill development, practitioners can build from families' strengths and existing funds of knowledge. In turn, it is hoped that efforts to support young children's literacy development can be meaningful in both the home and Head Start program.

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