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Family Literacy Programs: Where Have They Come from and Where Are They Going?

Abstract Family literacy programs in North America and the United Kingdom have enjoyed widespread public and political support. Thousands of initiatives following a variety of models currently operate under the spectrum of family literacy programs. In this paper, the influence of learning theories, the research on children’s early literacy development, and the sociopolitical context with gave rise to the intervention movement, will be reviewed with respect to their impact on current models of family literacy programs. The research on program evaluation is also considered, and is related to current practice and future directions in family literacy programming.

Keywords family literacy, early literacy, parent involvement, early intervention

Theoretical Perspectives on Human Development

Cognitive and social constructive theories of intelligence and learning that emerged in the 1950s challenged the maturational and behavioral perspectives of learning theory advanced in earlier decades. These new theories would, in the emerging sociopolitical context, prove to have potent effects on the practice of educating young children. Teale and Sulzby (1986) argue that the impetus for this “cognitive revolution” was the research on the cognitive development of children by Jerome Bruner and his colleagues at the newly established Center for Cognitive Studies at Harvard University. Bruner (1960) advanced the view of the child as both active and capable in advancing their own learning. The work of other researchers at this time complemented the constructivist emphasis of Bruner’s work, and highlighted the importance of early experiences. Hunt (1961) rejected the maturationists’ notion of the immutability of intelligence and called for a consideration of environmental factors in children’s developmental trajectories. Bloom’s (1964) work bolstered Hunt’s position that the environment

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in which children lived was a greater determinant of intellectual development than the genetic characteristics that the child possessed. He argued that environmental influences were more potent in the first five years of a child's life than at any other time in the lifespan. The belief that environmental manipulation could and should be utilized to improve developmental outcomes, gave new direction to the field of education.

The work of Piaget (1952, 1955) underscored the role of experience in shaping cognitive development. As Trawick-Smith (1997) noted, Piaget integrated elements of psychology, biology, philosophy and logic into a comprehensive explanation of how knowledge is acquired. Piaget posited that the emerging capacity for mental representation, evidenced in the child's increasing language mastery and frequency of symbolic play, enabled the young child to begin to connect previous disparate experiences into related thoughts, thus creating the schemas upon which learning is "constructed." Through assimilation and accommodation, these schemas became increasingly sophisticated. He portrayed the young child as intrinsically motivated by curiosity to make meaning from experiences, and successful in constructing knowledge from these experiences.

Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) theory of cognitive development would become well known in the Western world after Piaget's influence in the field of education had begun to take root, and although similar in its emphasis on the active nature of the young learner, it underscored the social nature of learning. Vygotsky considered the role of language, both in thought and in social interaction, critical for mediating scaffolding, a process by which an adult or a more capable learner would work in the child's zone of proximal development to facilitate the child's new learning. He argued that through private speech, the child developed the capacity for inner speech essential for problem solving and general cognitive growth. In its emphasis on the socially constructed nature of learning, Vygotsky's theory served to strengthen the arguments posed in other constructive theories on the critical influences of the environment on intellectual development. For Vygotsky, the most important of these influences is the adults' deliberate engagement in supporting the child's learning.

In summary, these theories resulted in an increasing interest in the years before formal education that were hitherto regarded as a waiting period before the introduction of formal education. The construct of the young child as a capable, active learner, emerging concurrently with the advancement of theories of environmental influence on intelligence and human development has had a profound influence on paradigms of early care and education. Further, the role of language in mediating thought and learning, posed by the cognitive theorists, sharply contrasted the behavioral perspective of language acquisition as imitation without active meaning-making. Consequently, the early years with their potential as a period of rich learning opportunities, increasingly gained the

attention of researchers, educators, parents and policy makers.

Research on Children's Literacy Development: The Advent of the "Emergent" Perspective

One area of interest for researchers investigating the development of preschool-age children was early literacy development. Delores Durkin's (1966) study of children who learned to read before formal instruction, was particularly important in providing insight for understanding the child and family characteristics that could influence early reading development. She observed that although median IQ scores were high among the two groups of early readers in her study, the range of scores varied greatly above and below the population mean. Intelligence alone could not explain this phenomenon.

More importantly, Durkin pursued the question of what kind of characteristics could be observed in the behavior of these children and the homes from which they came. In these families, parents were willing to give early help in response to the children's questions about print, believing that reading did not have to be taught only by a qualified person in a school context. She also observed that there was no simple connection between socioeconomic status and early reading. What was important was that these parents spent time with their children, reading to them, responding to their questions and requests for help, and demonstrating in their own lives that reading is a rich source of relaxation, information, and contentment. She further argued that early readers were not a "special brand" of children, suggesting rather, that their success in reading was almost a by-product of high interest in print especially in "what words say," and a high frequency of experiences with print. Margaret Clark's (1976) study of Scottish children a decade later would confirm Durkin's observations. Like Durkin, she observed a wide variance in children's IQ scores and family socioeconomic characteristics, and similar child characteristics and patterns of interaction among the children and their parents.

In the mid 1960s, Marie Clay's work in New Zealand with children entering kindergarten also illustrated that young children were quite active in theorizing and constructing knowledge about print. Clay's (1975) later study of children's writing, reflected the increasing attention being given to the relationship between reading and writing development, and illustrated that young children's writing reflects their emerging understandings about the rules of print and provides a rich resource for insight into these understandings.

The 1970s witnessed an explosion of interest in early literacy understanding. This included a study of children's use of letter-sound knowledge to invent spellings for words they used in composition (Chomsky, 1971; Read, 1971).

Ferreiro and Teberosky's work (Ferreiro, 1978; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982) in Argentina and Mexico examined children's knowledge of the Spanish alphabetic principle, and their represented understandings of syllable and word. Numerous other studies reflected the increasing interest in the study of children's attempts at meaning-making from written language (Holdaway, 1979; Paley, 1981). Later work in emergent literacy research has focused on the formulation of conceptual models of emergent literacy (Lomax & McGee, 1987; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Smith-Chant, & Colton, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), and the relation of emergent literacy development to conventional reading development (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005; Scarborough, Dobrich, & Hager, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Tunmer, Herriman, & Nesdale, 1988).

In summary, the field of emergent literacy research complemented the perspectives emerging from the field of developmental psychology. Evidence of what young children could do in the context of reading and writing provided evidence for the contention made by Piaget, Bruner and others' contention about the capability of the young child to construct knowledge. Because these studies focused on the accomplishments of young children before formal instruction, they meaningfully exemplified Vygotsky's concepts of scaffolding children's experiences. Clearly, the home was one important context in which such learning could take place.

The Emerging Sociopolitical Context: Toward the Intervention Movement

The development of family literacy programs in the U.S. stemmed from a strong federal mandate to fund nation-wide early intervention programs to improve educational outcomes for children deemed to be at risk, especially minority children living in poverty. By the mid-1960s intervention programs increasingly appeared, most notably Head Start, federally funded by the Johnson administration in 1965. The implementation of this program marked the beginnings of the early intervention movement (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990). While many intervention programs in the 1960s focused on direct delivery of programming to children (Dickinson, 1994), Head Start focused on a wider range of child and family needs, including health and nutrition, as well as parenting and social services supports. It was firmly believed that the costs associated with early intervention programs would be justified due to the expected improvements in the education of these children, as well as the long-term economic implications of having these children grow up to be self-supporting citizens, raising their own children in an enriched environmental climate, thus "breaking

the cycle of poverty” (Dickinson, 1994).

Initial evaluation reports of program effects, typically but controversially measured by IQ scores, generally found that modest gains were achieved, but these gains usually faded within a year or two after intervention ended (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990). Although the overall results of intervention failed to meet the hopes and expectations of those who had lobbied for such programs, examination of the various program implementation models from early evaluations tentatively suggested that the programs resulting in the greatest effects on children’s outcomes were those that involved parents and considered the child’s literacy development in the context of the family (Florin & Dokecki, 1983). Despite the lack of robust evidence in the 1970s that parent involvement in programming was critical to raising children’s educational outcomes, the belief that this would be borne out in subsequent interventions influenced the direction that practice would take. Such hopes were bolstered by the emerging field of systems theory in the 1970s.

Systems Theories of Human Development and Their Effects on Program Design

Systems theories attempt to elucidate the relationships among the various social systems such as individuals, families, neighborhoods, community institutions, culture, and governments, their influences upon each other, and on the development of individuals in society. Numerous theorists have highlighted elements of the dynamic and interactive phenomenon that systems theories suggest. Sameroff and Chandler’s (1975) theory suggested a “caretaker casualty” by which familial, social and environmental effects mediate traumatic medical or biological risk factors, thus compounding or limiting the development of the child. Further, this theory suggests that although medical or biological risk factors (reproductive casualties) may play a role in the development of later problems, it is the caretaking environment that will determine the ultimate outcome. Meisels and Shonkoff (2000) argue that Sameroff and Chandler’s theory of the bidirectional influence of biology and environment on human development impacted on research and service delivery in the evolving models of intervention. Sameroff and Fiese (2000) have continued to expand on this theory, further emphasizing that multiple contributing forces at multiple levels of the child’s life are determinants of child development, and that child characteristics are a force within this transactional model. They suggest that intervention models that focus on single causal factors are inadequate for the study or manipulation of developmental outcomes.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological model, in which the importance of the

family and the broader community in shaping children's development is recognized, directed the attention of intervention program providers toward parents as critical agents of influence on the child's development. As Wasik, Dobbins, and Herrmann (2001) state, "his early writings promoted a shift toward recognizing the family itself as a more appropriate focus for intervention rather than the child only" (p. 448). The belief in the importance of the family's influence on the child's educational development focused attention on the inability of some parents to provide such support, whether due to lack of literacy skills themselves, lack of knowledge about how to support their children's literacy development, or both. This shift in attention resulted in a new direction in intervention: the family literacy movement (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004).

System theories contributed to a "widening of the lens" with respect to program design and delivery (Farran, 2000). Intervention programs increasingly included home visits, involving parents more directly in the learning activities of their children. As these programs evolved, the literacy practices and needs of the whole family began to be included in the scope of program design. Adult literacy was recognized as an important influence on children's development, and educational programs to address the literacy needs of adults became more prevalent.

An early model of family literacy programming that gained popularity in practice was the comprehensive model. Four components typify this high-intensity model: adult literacy, child literacy, parent education, and parent and child together time (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004). Kentucky's Parent and Child Education Program (PACE) is an early example of the comprehensive model; it influenced many subsequent models, most notably Even Start, which emerged from the National Literacy Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1990. The comprehensive model, or Kenan model as it became known, influenced program approaches outside the U.S., particularly in Britain; however, its effect in supplanting a variety of local models has been met with controversy (Hannon & Bird, 2004). In addition to comprehensive models that include intense direct child and parent education, a large number and wide variety of other less-intense programs have subsequently emerged (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995; Thomas, 1998) or re-emerged in spite of the dominance of the Kenan model (Hannon & Bird, 2004). Numerous frameworks for categorizing family literacy programs have been proposed.

Emerging Program Models and Program Evaluation

In spite of the variations in programs, many definitions of family literacy programs in the U.S. literature include adult literacy development as a basic

component of what constitutes a “family literacy program” (Lonigan, 2004; Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002). Snow’s (1994) model is perhaps the most useful for understanding the intent of programs and the nature of what actually takes place. She suggested that family literacy programs that focus on child outcomes may differ across five factors: the target of intervention (child, parent, teacher, or a combination thereof), the age of the child upon commencement of the program (infant, preschooler, or school age), the participation structure, that is, who is in attendance in the program (parent-child, facilitator-child, facilitator-parent, or a combination of models), the nature of evaluation (the extensiveness and chosen indicators as criteria for assessment, which include cognitive, behavioral, or affective measures exclusively, or in conjunction with others), and the conduit for training (the activities by which the learning takes place, which may include modeling strategies in workshops, the provision of informational materials to parents, or the provision of educational materials for children, such as children’s storybooks). This framework is helpful for succinctly distinguishing the core elements of individual programs.

Family Literacy in England

Although much of the literature on early intervention programs comes from the U.S., research from other countries also suggests that early intervention over the last few decades has continued to evolve in approaches and practices (Topping, 1996; Hirst, Hannon, & Nutbrown, 2010). Hannon and Bird (2004) report that in England, through the 1970s, early education provided through the nursery school system, and adult education initiatives remained separate educational endeavors. In the 1980s, however, organized approaches to involving parents in listening to their children’s reading at home signaled the beginning of what could be considered family literacy programming. As the 1980s continued, more prescriptive approaches to these efforts were developed and applied, and in-school workshops began to be offered where parents engaged in reading with their children. Like their American counterparts, British researchers in the 1980s were documenting the developing literacy understandings of young children, in particular story knowledge, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness in young children (Hannon, 1987; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982). Hannon and Bird argue that, “such research did not have an immediate impact on practice, but created a climate favorable for the development of family literacy programs in subsequent years” (p. 27).

Adult literacy programs during this time did not focus on the role of those participants who were parents, or involve children in the programming services offered to parent learners. In the early 1990s however, the two fields began to

converge when the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU), a government supported, quasi-independent adult literacy agency, adopted the Kenan Model developed by the National Center for Family Literacy, a privately sponsored organization in the U.S. Linking low parental literacy to reading difficulties in children, ALBSU was successful in popularizing this model of service delivery. This model became the preferred design for government funding, resulting in the discontinuation of support for locally developed models that did not adhere to this philosophy and design (Hannon & Bird, 2004).

In 1993 the National Literacy Trust was formed as a private, charitable foundation for the support of literacy development in England. It provided philosophical and financial support for the “locally made” program designs that had diminished as a result of the favorable funding status given to comprehensive models offered by the ALBSU (which later became known as the Basic Skills Agency). Later in the decade, a trend toward greater government funding for alternative models was observed, and funding was distributed to local educational authorities to support community-developed initiatives.

In summary, family literacy programming in England, although quite different in its history to developments in the U.S., have resulted in a myriad of program designs, philosophies and funding structures that currently suggest considerable similarity to the current U.S. situation. Large scale, uniformly-structured programs coexist with locally designed initiatives that vary greatly in focus, intensity and design. Both government funding and private foundations are involved in supporting current programs, and each has an interest in researching the effects of these programs (Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Hutchison, & Wilkin, 1996; National Literacy Trust, 2001).

Family Literacy in Canada

In Canada, family literacy programs typically developed as a response by individual communities to local needs, and operated with varying levels of financial support from provincial government, federal government, or private sources such as charitable foundation grants and corporate grants (Thomas, 1998). These programs rely on a continual cycle of funding awards, although often these sources of funding are not stable from year to year (Timmons, 2008). In addition to sponsorship of individual programs offered by community-level organizations, many provinces provide more stable funding to community-based family resource programs that operate within a variety of settings including freestanding facilities, schools, and buildings belonging to community-based service organizations. In provincially sponsored programs, such as the Ontario Early Years centers, while there is some commonality in the kinds of experiences

families may engage in, such as parent-child play time, art making experiences, or story time, there is no prescribed program that participants must engage in.

With respect to programs that are typically seen as “family literacy programs” across Canada, these programs may be affiliated with educational institutions, including universities, colleges, or research centers, but may still maintain a high level of autonomous functioning. Over a decade ago, Thomas’s (1998) survey of family literacy programs across Canada illustrated several examples of local initiatives designed to address the family literacy needs of their particular communities. These programs operated from large urban to small rural communities, and focused on one or more dimensions of family literacy: child education, parent education, adult education, and/or employability skills. More recently, Kennedy’s (2008) survey indicates that the wide variation in programming models, foci and funding sources continues to be prevalent across Canada.

The role of the community in family literacy programming in Canada has been, and continues to be especially significant. It is largely from the efforts of individuals and groups who live in these communities that the identification of the literacy needs of the local people and the initiation of action to bring people and programs together occur. The surveys of Canadian family literacy programs reported by both Thomas (1998) and Kennedy (2008) reveal strong inter-group cooperation among community members where programs are offered. These include literacy program facilitators, community center staff, local business people, health services professionals, church leaders, and local school educators, all of whom provide support financially with funding or in-kind donations, space to operate, expertise in education or other human development areas, or avenues for public awareness about literacy programs available.

The Canadian experience, then, has not included widely implemented, government-mandated literacy programs. That education in Canada is governed at a provincial rather than a federal level may, in part, explain this. With respect to the targeting of program recipients, differences may stem more from the opposing directions from which the programs developed in each country: top-down in the U.S. versus bottom-up in Canada.

In Canada, many family literacy programs are not targeted at groups deemed to be at risk, but are more inclusive in nature. Hence, many Canadian programs under the family literacy umbrella do not include adult literacy development in their goals, focusing instead on parents as literacy mentors of their children. In this way, U.S. programs such as Project EASE (Jordan, Snow, & Porche; 2000) are similar to many Canadian programs such as PRINTS (Fagan & Cronin, 1998) that focus on helping parents enhance their role as the literacy mentors of their own children rather than focusing simultaneously on child and adult literacy. As Hannon and Bird (2004) have pointed out, there needs to be room under the

umbrella of “family literacy” for programs that allow parents to develop their capacity for mentoring their children’s literacy, while acknowledging that parents may not want or need to address their own literacy abilities.

Program Evaluation

Evaluations of Intervention Programs for High-Risk Groups

The efficacy of intervention programs, particularly high-intensity models for high-risk groups, has continued to be evaluated. High-quality child-focused programs significantly improve children’s cognitive and academic development (Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Ramey & Campbell, 1984; Campbell & Ramey, 1994). The additional influence of parent-involvement components in such programs, however, has long been debated. White, Taylor and Moss’s meta-analysis (1992) suggested that in intense, high-quality, child-focused programs, parent-involvement components do not significantly enhance child academic outcomes. Powell (1994), however, argued that White, Taylor and Moss’s review was limited in scope and did not reflect the effects of the broad range of programs that involve parents for the purposes of enhancing child development.

Evaluation of the efficacy of parent involvement in high-intensity programs is further clouded by criticisms that measures to adequately assess outcomes are lacking or inadequate (Powell, 1994), and that measurement of outcomes is too narrowly focused on children’s academic and cognitive skills (Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Upshur, & Weisner, 2000). These researchers have suggested that parent-involvement programs may benefit the family more broadly, for example, in the socio-emotional domain of functioning, which indirectly influences children’s cognitive development; yet, measurement approaches may ignore this domain or lack adequate tools to measure change (Powell, 1994). An evaluation of Even Start (St. Pierre, Ricciuti, & Rimdzius, 2005) found modest to negligible gains in parent and child learning, but suggested that such outcomes may have resulted from less than optimal curriculum implementation and parent uptake of program services. At present, there remain equivocal findings with regard to the added benefits of parent involvement in programs in which children receive high-quality programming.

Other models that focus on supporting families with young children are also being studied. One of these is the Toronto First Duty Project which offers wrap-around care and education to kindergarten children, providing families with access to an array of family and child services to optimize opportunities for children’s development (Corter et al., 2007; Pelletier & Corter, 2005).

While the added contribution of parent-involvement in high-intensity programs requires further investigation, the research on the effects of parent-involvement in lower intensity programs also bears further inquiry. As reviews of family literacy program practice indicate, lower intensity programs represent a substantial proportion of program offerings, and further, these programs are not necessarily targeted to “high-risk” populations (Hannon & Bird, 2004; Kennedy, 2008). It is not possible, therefore, to generalize the research findings related to high-intensity programs for high-risk populations to the lower intensity or lower risk sectors of family literacy programming. Lower intensity programs have not been as extensively evaluated quantitatively, although qualitative approaches have been reported (Elish-Piper, 1997; Emberton, 2004; Wrigley, 2004). Qualitative approaches have yielded insights into parents’ and practitioners’ perceptions of their own participation and learning and that of the children. Quantitative approaches are also needed to better understand the relation between practitioner and parent observations and perceptions of learning, and quantitative measures of parent and child learning.

Some evaluation of lower intensity programming for high-risk groups, such as teenage mothers and low-income, low-education English speaking and non-English speaking immigrant parents in the Parents as Teachers home-visiting program, is reported by Wagner and Clayton (1999). This study, focusing on both parent and child program effects, found no gains in parents’ attitudes, knowledge, or home behaviours, but for some subgroups of children, particularly those with non-English speaking parents, some modest cognitive and social gains were made.

The findings for another lower intensity home-based and centre-based program for low-income, low education parents—the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPPY)—have been equivocal (Baker, Piotrkowski, & Brooks-Gunn, 1998). This randomized controlled study, the first empirical study of HIPPPY in the U.S., focused on the program effects on two cohorts of children. All children in the study also attended preschool. It found that while HIPPPY children in one cohort group made significant gains in several areas of social and cognitive development and maintained these gains in a one-year follow-up study, the other cohort group made no gains by the program’s end or in the follow-up. In a separate empirical study of the effects of HIPPPY (Baker, Piotrkowski & Brooks-Gunn, 1999) on children not enrolled in preschool programs, similar findings were obtained. Although one cohort made significantly greater social and cognitive gains than the control group, the other cohort did not. In both studies, an examination of cohort characteristics failed to explain differences in outcomes. It was suggested that in future studies of HIPPPY, greater scrutiny of the variations in the delivery of programming to parents and the degree of parent uptake and implementation at home may explain variations in child outcomes.

Lower Intensity Programs for Lower Risk Groups

There is a smaller literature on studies of the effectiveness of lower intensity programs for families not necessarily deemed to be at substantial risk. Jordan, Snow and Porche (2000) conducted a study with European-American, English-speaking children from low to middle-income families and their parents. The purpose of the program was to support children's language and literacy skills through enhanced parent-child interactions at home. The intervention group parents attended five monthly parent meetings and received weekly packages of literacy-related materials sent home through the school. The findings indicated that the intervention group made significantly greater gains than the control group in terms of vocabulary, story comprehension, and narrative retelling. Growth was especially strong for initially low-achievers. It was concluded from the study that early interventions should not focus only on the most at-risk groups. Since the program effects were strong even for this relatively low-risk population, the efficacy of involving parents is argued to be worthwhile for a wider range of families.

Sharif, Ozuah, Dinkevich and Mulvihill (2003) examined the potential of a brief literacy intervention to enhance children's vocabulary. Although the study sample was drawn from a very low-income district, more than half of the parents in the study had a college education. The intervention consisted of a series of four one-hour workshops in which storybook reading-based language interactions were the focus. The intervention group made significantly greater gains than the control group at the post-intervention assessment conducted seven months after the intervention ended. In contrast to other studies in which program effects on child outcomes were stronger for higher risk participants, the effects on receptive vocabulary were particularly strong for children of the college-educated mothers. Based on this finding, the study's authors recommended that intervention programs be targeted to include more highly educated mothers as well as less-educated parents who are more typically targeted for such programs. The overall findings of this study, however, may be confounded due to the method used for group assignment. The intervention group families volunteered to participate in the workshops; the control group, however, declined participation. Thus, equal parent motivation or ability to engage in literacy interactions with their children at home, due to parents' literacy level, parent efficacy, time constraints, or other factors cannot be assumed. Such factors may partly explain group differences in children's vocabulary growth and, thereby, confound the question of program efficacy.

In a randomized controlled study, Saint-Laurent and Giasson (2005) examined the efficacy of a family literacy program on Grade 1 children's reading and writing development. Classes with teachers who volunteered to participate in the

study were assigned to the intervention or control group. From these classes families were invited to participate. In the intervention program, low and middle-income parents attended eight 90-minute bi-monthly sessions aimed at supporting their Grade 1 children's reading and writing development. Their children's classroom teachers also sent home storybooks on a weekly basis for the families to read together. The results indicated that the intervention group children made significantly greater gains than the control group children on the reading tests and on the writing measures of invented spelling, sentence structure, and mean length of written text. Further, when families were grouped by lower or higher income levels, examination of the gains made by participants in the intervention group were similar. Based on this finding, the study's authors suggested that even for middle-income families there is a need for parental support programs to enhance children's school performance.

Each of these studies, with either a significant or exclusive parent focus, suggests that lower intensity parent-focused programs may be an effective method of family literacy program delivery. Indeed, Sénéchal and Young (2008), reported in a meta-analytical review of parent involvement in supporting reading acquisition of children in kindergarten to Grade 3, that overall, there were positive effects on children's reading development. The degree of impact, however, depended on the type of involvement. Reese, Sparks and Leyva's (2010) examination of the impact of parent interventions focused on children who had not yet entered school. Their review of the literature found evidence that all three types of interventions examined—shared book reading, conversational interaction, and writing interactions—can be effective for improving specific aspects of language or literacy development, where these aspects were specifically targeted through the focus of the intervention.

There is no single best approach that can meet the needs of all learners, and flexible, responsive designs may yield the greatest effects on participant learning (Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001). In practice, however, the dizzying array of program designs and implementations in evidence in Canada, the U.S., England and other countries today, confounds the practitioner seeking direction for program planning. Many questions have not yet been addressed in the research on shorter term family literacy programs, including how the participation structure of family literacy programs affects parent and child learning. The field of family literacy has enjoyed widespread public support (Padak et al., 2002). If this support is to continue, researchers must continue to “unpack the black box” that is family literacy (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, & Fuligni, 2000). Through a systematic examination of the various features by which programs are given shape and substance, and the relation of these to participant factors, research can identify the components of program design that are critical in influencing family literacy program effectiveness for various populations. Increasingly, the research

literature is calling for such investigation (National Literacy Trust, 2001; Padak et al., 2002; Purcell-Gates, 2000, Sénéchal & Young, 2008).

Conclusion

Family literacy programs have been shaped by three major influences: developmental theory, research on emergent literacy and parent involvement, and sociopolitical developments. The combined influence of developmental theory and research on emergent literacy provided new insights for both educational practice and social policy in the 1960s. The notion that children could take an active role in their learning, and that the provision of environmental supports could enhance the opportunities of vulnerable children, provided the theoretical base from which the intervention movement developed. Systems theories emerging in the 1970s suggested an ecological perspective for understanding the complexities of child development and resulted in an increasing focus on families in intervention. In the 1980s, “family literacy” increasingly became an area of social and educational focus. As programs have continued to emerge, many models have developed of varying intensity, use of resources, and intended goals. Among these, some programs focus primarily on supporting parents as literacy mentors of their children, and are often not specifically targeted to “at risk” groups, but are more universal in nature. In the U.S., England, and Canada, different program models are utilized to varying degrees, influenced by political and social shifts over time.

Increasingly, the effects of parental involvement in both higher- and lower intensity programs have been examined. While there is a call for further study (Purcell-Gates, 2000; Sanders & Shivley, 2007; Sénéchal & Young, 2008) it is also noted that practical and ethical considerations present considerable challenges for evaluating family involvement programs (Timmons, 2008). In the current economic climate, family-focused programs are increasingly threatened by funding reductions (Prins & Gungor, 2011). Thoughtful approaches to evaluation that consider the relations between program design features and program effects are needed to guide future practice in family involvement programs. This is important not only to provide the evidence necessary for maintaining funding support, but also to ensure that program participation yields optimal results for participating families.

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