

Literacy for a Lifetime

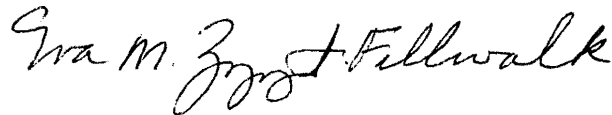
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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Abstract

Family literacy is a concept rooted in the long history of passing skills and values from older to younger generations. It is an idea that has been around for centuries, but only recently has been heavily promoted. Family literacy has a variety of definitions and there are wide arrays of programs that promote family literacy. Research also indicates the many benefits of family literacy programs not only to the child and the adult, but the family as a whole too. We have researched the history and benefits of family literacy programs, as well as created a literacy packet, promotional presentation and brochure for a local family literacy program.

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Author's Statement

When trying to decide what we wanted to do for our honors thesis we both knew that we wanted to explore the idea of family literacy, but we didn't know what avenues we wanted to take for the journey. After talking to our thesis advisor we decided that we would like to try and create a family literacy program for the students and families in the Whitely community. The idea for this project came about after we spent a semester immersed in the Whitely community through an immersive program called Schools Within the Context of Communities. During this semester we spent a lot of time at the Roy C. Buley Center, Huffer Memorial Children's Center and Longfellow Elementary getting to know the children and families in the community. We thought this project would be the perfect way to continue working in and helping the families in the Whitely community.

However, when we came up with this idea and wrote our proposal we were getting ready to embark on our adventures into student teaching. While we were both student teaching the idea of creating a family literacy program had already taken root and was in its beginning stages. When we returned from our student teaching a curriculum had already been developed and a program had already started, though with little attendance. Therefore we decided we would best be able to help the families by researching the benefits of family literacy programs and creating pieces to promote the program. Along the way we also thought that we could contribute to the curriculum by creating a literacy packet filled with a variety of literacy components for families to take home with them. This has led to the formation of our project today, a paper researching the benefits of family literacy, a promotional presentation and brochure, and a literacy packet.

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Literacy for a Lifetime

Common sense tells us—and the experts agree—that the home is the child's first school and the parents are the child's first and most important teacher. As early as 1908, Edmund Burke Huey stated that children's learning “all begins with parents reading to children.” Parents truly are the first teachers a child has, and they are the teachers that a child has for the longest time. Parents or other caregivers are potentially the most important people in the education of a child. Schools and teachers do play an important role in promoting literacy, but the family is essential in preparing a child for the literacy tasks he or she will encounter in elementary school. There is a strong correlation between a child's home environment/experiences and literacy achievement in school. Parents want to help their child, but lack the knowledge of *how* to do so. As educators become more aware of the gap between students with strong home support and those without, they are beginning to develop programs that nurture the involvement of families in literacy development.

Literacy is conventionally defined as the ability to read and write, and references to a literate person connote such ability. Literacy has also been conceptualized as a set of intricate, multidimensional skills that begin at birth and develop over a person's lifetime from childhood to adulthood (Morrow, 1995). To be literate requires knowledge of letter-word correspondence and word recognition. It also involves knowledge of one's environment, which is necessary

to comprehend what one reads (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991). One has to have experiences in order to make meaning out of what he or she is reading. This can be a significant issue when children's world views are limited by economic disadvantage. Our fascination with how literacy and language skills develop and our concern when children experience difficulty in obtaining these skills has led to intensive studies on the roots of literacy. This examination has directed us to families—the environment in which nearly everyone learns the basic skills that form the foundation for further learning—and family literacy.

Although the term family literacy is relatively recent, the practice of family literacy, throughout history, has been consistently present in homes and communities across the generations. There are two researchers who had a significant impact on the study of family literacy. In 1968, Edward Burke Huey wrote *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in which he examined the relationship between parents and children and its effect on children's literacy learning. Denny Taylor unified the two words, *family* and *literacy*, as a concept and coined the term in her dissertation *Family Literacy: Young Children Learning to Read and Write* in 1983.

As other leaders began to see the family's role in literacy, so did former First Lady Barbara Bush. She chose family literacy for her focus as First Lady because many of the problems she was worried about—crime, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, hunger, and disease—would be lessened “if people had the literacy skills they need to help them accomplish their goals and realize their dreams” (Bush, 1995). In 1989, she formed The Barbara Bush Foundation for

Family Literacy and family literacy received national attention. The foundation focused on promoting the value of literacy in families and helping them understand that the home is the child's first school, the parent is the child's first teacher, and reading is the child's first subject.

Family literacy is commonly seen as efforts to strengthen parents' and children's literacy and to foster collaboration between the home and the school. It involves children developing concepts about language and print; parents and children reading, writing, talking, and listening together at home; and programs building efforts for parents and youth to share in literacy (Krol-Sinclair & DeBruin-Parecki, 2003). However, no single definition of 'family literacy' could do justice to the complexity of families and the multiple literacies that are part of their everyday lives.

The lack of a clear definition has not stopped family literacy programs from appearing all over the world. Some programs are required to comply with standards put in place by governments or funders. Others construct unique programs with their participants to focus on more specific cultural and individual needs and to address their common goals.

One common goal in starting a family literacy program is the role of parents in their child's education. Educators have long focused their study on the role that parents play in an effort to comprehend the high rates of failure among some groups of children. There truly is a relationship between a child's early reading success and the parents' own reading behaviors. This has led many educators to begin programs that address the family as a whole rather than the child alone. Stricht and McDonald (1998) were among the first to refer to such

programs as intergenerational literacy programs, two-generation programs, and family literacy programs.

Particular interest has been placed on the relationship between children's school success and two parent-related factors: parent education and home literacy practices. The importance of parental education is highlighted by results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and are capable of in various subject areas. Results have consistently shown that children with parents who have higher levels of education have higher rates of performance on achievement tests in all subject areas (Paratore, 2003). Parents' levels of education also correlated with the degree of parental involvement in their child's academic career. Parents without high school diplomas are less likely to attend school events and meetings with teachers. They are less likely to volunteer or be committee members (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Data also indicates that parents with lower levels of education are less likely to read newspapers, magazines, or books and they are less likely to read to their children.

Home literacy practices, the second, parent-related factor, became a focus in 1966 when Dolores Durkin published her study on children who read early. According to Durkin, early readers have parents who spend time with them and read to them, who answer their questions and help them, and who demonstrate that reading is a valued pastime (Paratore, 2003).

Important relationships have formed between home literacy practices and parents' levels of education. The evidence argues for parental education

programs created to accomplish two goals: to empower parents to advance their own levels of education; and to help parents come to understand activities that will help their children attain higher levels of education (Paratore, 2003).

Although family literacy programs all may have similar descriptions, they differ in the ways they attempt to address and meet their needs.

The family literacy program we have helped to create is called Growing Readers Academy. Our program focuses on three main components: physical enrichment and empowerment for parents, literacy activities for parents and preschoolers together, and literacy learning for preschoolers. The first aspect involves a health and wellness component for parents. Parents attend a ZUMBA fitness class twice a week and bring their children with them. ZUMBA is a Latin-inspired, dance-fitness program that blends international music and dance steps. Parents and their preschoolers come early (before ZUMBA) to participate in literacy activities together. During this time, parents and children do activities together to help parents get ideas that will improve home literacy practices. After literacy time together, parents participate in physical enrichment while teachers work with their preschoolers to improve literacy. After ZUMBA, parents are given light snacks and involved in parent empowerment. Parent empowerment might include many different aspects, but the underlying tone is to motivate parents to better their lives (i.e. setting goals for themselves). Although the ways in which each program addresses its common goals may be different, the benefits of family literacy remain very similar.

Family literacy programs do work and their benefits are widespread and significant. They influence the lives of parents and children positively through

family support and education. Four different groups receive the benefits of family literacy programs. The first group to benefit is the children.

Children benefit, first and foremost, through higher levels of literacy and academic achievement. Children become more ready to attend school, will do so more regularly, and will be more likely to complete their educations. The oral language of children participating in family literacy programs increases as well as the motivation to read (Padak & Rasinski, 2003).

Parents also benefit from participating in family literacy programs by gaining more opportunities to learn and improving their reading and writing skills. Their attitudes about and values of education improve. Parents acquire knowledge of parenting options and child literacy development. Parents also have the opportunity to enhance their job satisfaction and employment status and their social awareness and self-advocacy increases (Padak & Rasinski, 2003).

When both parents and children benefit from family literacy programs, families will obviously benefit as a result. Families benefit through greater emotional closeness and involvement in education, which leads to better achievement for children in school. Families learn to value education and engage in more literate behaviors at home (Padak & Rasinski, 2003).

When parents persist in family literacy programs, persistence leads to achievement, which can benefit society by influence broader social and economic issues. Family literacy programs have the potential to positively affect major social problems such as nutrition and health problems (ZUMBA), low school achievement and high school drop out rates, teen parenting, and joblessness (Padak & Rasinski, 2003).

Family literacy is an evidence-based, family-centered educational approach that can improve the basic reading, mathematics and life skills of both parents and children. Family literacy, however, can offer more than educational benefits. High-quality family literacy programs prepare caregivers to succeed as parents and employees, enhance bonds between parents and children, strengthen connections between families, schools, and other institutions, and revitalize neighborhood networks, leading to stronger communities (National Human Services Assembly, 2007).

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