

HOME SWEET HOME:
HOME SUPPORT AND THE DEVELOPMENT
OF EARLY LITERACY SKILLS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the current this project, I explore the issues of children who struggle in terms of their early literacy skill acquisition, and how to support the development of these skills in the home environment. By examining this topic through the lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, I highlight the importance of the nature and quality of interactions between a young child and a more-knowledgeable other (MKO). Motivation and self-determination theory also suggest that a child's level of interest is paramount in regards to their participation and level of engagement in literacy activities. In this project, I conduct a review of relevant literature that indicated that the types of support provided at home to children who struggle with the development of their early literacy skills play an important role in the development of these early literacy skills. More specifically, the instructional quality of parent-child dialogue, both in literacy-based activities such as shared reading as well as in everyday conversation, is related to the development of children's early literacy skills. The affective climate within parent-child literacy experiences has also been found to be associated with children's reading motivations. Furthermore, the presence of older siblings who serve as MKOs and the literacy-based activities that young children engage in with these MKOs provide opportunities for rich and enjoyable learning experiences. Lastly, there are different types of reading materials that expose children to rich language and increase children's motivation to engage in literacy activities. In connection with this project, I have created a website describing how the development of children's early literacy skills and various types of support provided in the home environment are related. I provide parents with a summary of relevant research and I also put forth recommendations for parents and educators to promote the development of children's early literacy skills.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my amazing educational journey, this capstone project, and my degree to my Grandad. He loved learning as much as I do and I know he is looking down on me with a huge amount of pride. Thank you for inspiring me to be a great student.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this capstone project, I explore the issues of children who struggle in terms of their early literacy skill acquisition, and how to support the development of these skills in the home environment. Early literacy skill acquisition is the process of developing and strengthening literacy skills (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002), and children who struggle with this process are those who have difficulty decoding and encoding print, where for some children this difficulty may be related, either in whole or in part, to a lack of motivation (Vallerand et al., 1992). I use the term “home environment” in the current paper in reference to aspects within a child’s home that may be connected to the degree and quality of support offered to children during literacy experiences that take place at home (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001). Children’s home environments will, of course, vary tremendously from child to child, so in this project I examine how the different types of support a child receives at home, including the instructional quality of parent-child dialogue, the affective climate within parent-child literacy experiences, and the support provided by siblings may be related to early literacy development (Bingham, 2007).

I use Anderson, Anderson, and Shapiro’s (2005) definition of literacy which is the “ability to encode and decode print” (p. 5) where print consists of both letters and numbers. I consider the value of multiliteracies (Westby, 2010) which include music, visual images, animation, gesture, and sound. I also draw from Roskos, Christie, and Richgels (2003) who consider the more specific element of early literacy and define it as “the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that precede learning to read and write in the primary grades (K–3)” (p. 2). More specifically, literacy involves a person’s ability to read and write, as well as his/her capacity to apply and use these abilities in meaningful ways whereby engagement with activities, both of an academic nature as well as those simply for pleasure, is facilitated (UNESCO, 2006). It is the

foundation that has been laid and a child's propensity towards literacy that are important as a child begins the journey to becoming a strong and capable reader and writer (Bennett et al., 2002).

In the next section, I provide context and background information for this project in my dual role as an early childhood educator and a parent with an interest in supporting children's early literacy skill development.

Context and Personal Background

I am a Registered Early Childhood Educator in a kindergarten classroom with 28 children. The school I work at is located in a fairly new suburban neighbourhood in south-eastern Ontario in Canada. My role is to partner with a teacher and support the children as they learn through their play explorations. In our bilingual (English-French) kindergarten classroom there is a wide range of literacy skills within one group of 5-year old children. Throughout the past 8 years, I have observed and documented how some children struggle with their reading skills, whereas others are able to read a wide range of materials independently, in French or in English. I have also documented how parents of children who are already decoding words want to ensure their children are sufficiently challenged and often ask my partner and me what they can do to cultivate their children's motivation to engage in literacy activities at home and to promote continued literacy growth. In conversations with parents of children with emerging literacy skills, I have learned that they are concerned that their children will struggle in subsequent grades and often inquire about what they can do at home to offer effective literacy support.

Despite my belief that literacy is one of the most important aspects of a child's cognitive and academic development (Duncan et al., 2007), I never felt entirely confident in my ability to

support learning in this area. This past year I became particularly interested in researching developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) regarding the support of children's early literacy skill development, including those delineated by NAEYC (2009). There are three main areas of focus of DAP, and these include "what is known about child development and learning," "what is known about each child as an individual," and "what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live" (NAEYC, 2009, p.9). My interest in DAP emerged partly out of a desire to learn how I can best help my son who struggles with literacy and the children in my classroom strengthen their early literacy skills, and also as a result of studying and examining theory, research, and evidence-based practices in my Masters in Education program. More specifically, I was fascinated by the book and case study *Gnys at Wrk* (Bissex, 1985) where the author examined the progression of one child's early literacy skills over a five year period and how his interests and mother's support were related to his development. I began to understand the importance of embracing children's interests and using these interests as a basis for literacy experiences. An example of a tool that allowed me to support children's interests in literacy is "The Language Experience Approach" (Meyerson & Kulesza, 2006), where children draw a picture and dictate a corresponding statement that an adult transcribes for them. The idea is that children see their idea as it is recorded, and because the sentence is written in the children's exact words, they are able to read it back more easily than they would be able to with unfamiliar words. In the Language Experience Approach an educator or a parent supports a child in a literacy activity where the focus is determined by the child and his specific interests.

At the same time, I am a mother of two children, aged 7 and 9 years old. Ever since my children were infants, I have tried to ensure that literacy was interesting and pleasurable for them by snuggling together as we read a book before bed each night, playing letter games while

looking at the cereal box during breakfast, and nurturing their play that had an authentic literacy component. In our home, I have always viewed literacy as a means of enjoyment and also of achieving academic success; being a strong reader and writer enables me to enjoy the delights of a good book as well as to pursue higher education that has personally provided me with exciting professional opportunities, and the ability to learn more about specific topics that are important to and of interest to me, including the topic of the current project.

The inspiration for this project came from my personal experience as a parent and from my concern for my own child's early literacy development. When my younger child was in grade 1, he was falling increasingly behind his peers in both his reading and writing skills. More importantly, his morale and motivation were suffering as a result of this disparity and I felt compelled to help him build strong literacy skills and become a more capable, confident child. Carter¹ is in now grade 2 and he attends a French immersion school where 80% of the curriculum is implemented in French. Although he is doing well academically, he does not particularly like school, nor does he enjoy homework. When faced with an activity at home that involves reading, he has expressed "but I can't read" before he even tries, and this may reveal he has little confidence in his reading abilities in English because up until this year he has been learning exclusively in French at school, so he is only just starting to formally build a literacy foundation in English. Although I try to take advantage of authentic opportunities for him to read to me (including reading a Christmas card or the written "pop-ups" that appear while we – together with my husband - play "Super Mario Brothers" on our wii Nintendo video game device), Carter resists because of his lack of confidence and his assumption that he will not be successful.

¹All names are pseudonyms

In thinking about Carter, and also about other children, I was further inspired by my experiences as an Early Childhood Educator working with children who struggle with their early literacy skills and whose parents seek ways to support them. In the next section, I introduce and define key terms that are used throughout the rest of the project.

Key Terms

In addition to the specific terms that have already been defined, there are two additional key terms related to my knowledge of early literacy development that I define here. Throughout the current project I connect with personal and professional experiences, so the terms *observation* and *documentation* are used within the context of gathering and recording these experiences. During observation, “information is collected and could be measured against a whole body of knowledge about child development in general and that child in particular” (Nilsen, 2016, p. 2). In this project, I refer to observation in connection to literacy experiences, for example, while observing my son and the children in my classroom as they engaged in the literacy experiences that I describe in more detail in Chapter Three. Through the process of observation, I collected information that I felt I could measure against the knowledge I had on the current topic. Documentation involves the act of preserving these observations to enable later review (Nilsen, 2016), and following my observations of my son and the children in my classroom, I documented the observations through written recordings and in taking pictures. This process of documentation allowed me to review specific literacy activities and connect them with the literature.

Theoretical Background: Overview

In this section, I provide an overview of several theories that I later discuss in greater detail in Chapter Two. These include Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, Bronfenbrenner’s

(1977, 1986, 1994) ecological theory, and motivation and self-determination theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Vallerand et al., 1992).

I approach my examination of the topic through the lens of the social constructivist epistemology. Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes the role that children's social environments play in their active learning and asserts that how individuals understand their world is guided by how they subjectively interpret and make meaning of their experiences. I draw from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) that asserts that individuals learn through active participation while engaged in social experiences. In reference to sociocultural perspectives, Rogoff and Toma (1997) emphasized the value of collaboration and discussed the deep learning that can result from rich interactions with others. Furthermore, Robbins (2005) stated that our way of thinking is "contextually specific" (p. 143); very much dependent on our environments and those around us. I also draw from Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1986, 1994) ecological theory of human development as the foundation of this paper rests on the idea of the influence of our interrelatedness: "no human activity stands alone, unconnected, or independent of the social, historical, and cultural context" (Sánchez, 1999, p. 352). One of these activities that does not stand alone, but that is influenced by our interrelatedness is the learning of a new skill including reading and writing

Within sociocultural theory is the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), which is the difference between a child's developmental level and that which can be achieved with support offered by a more-knowledgeable other (MKO) who can be anyone with a greater understanding or ability in a particular area than the child (Vygotsky, 1978). Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) discussed the term scaffolding as the support provided by an MKO and a "process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or

achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90). Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory suggests that children learn through meaningful interactions with MKOs including parents and perhaps older siblings. As such, children learn early literacy skills through interactions with MKOs who provide support during literacy activities within the ZPD. These interactions and the degree and type of support children receive will vary according to each child’s unique home environment.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1986, 1994) ecological theory emphasized the important role that environmental contexts play in development. Sontag (1996) stated that not only do our environments shape us, but we also have an influence on our environments. Bronfenbrenner (1977) considered not only the immediate familial environment of a child, but also the larger environment that includes the communities, cultures, and the beliefs and ideals held within them. The ecological theory framework consists of a series of integrated systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each system is explored in further detail in Chapter Two.

With the type of support that children receive in the home environment in mind as the focus of this project, sociocultural theory informs my investigation in light of its concentration on the importance of the interactions between children and their family. Based on my experiences with my son and the children in my classroom, and given the importance of their motivation while approaching a literacy task, I also consider motivation theory and self-determination theory and discuss how they are related to children’s learning of early literacy skills (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Vallerand et al., 1992). Motivation theory considers the reasons why we behave in specific ways or engage in certain tasks (Deci et al., 1991; Vallerand et al., 1992). This theory differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic

motivation, where intrinsic motivation refers to an individual's desire to engage in a task for the pleasure derived from it, and extrinsic motivation refers to the interest in achieving a reward upon completion of a task (Deci et al., 1991). Deci et al. approached the topic of motivation through self-determination theory that considers the intention behind the engagement in a task. More specifically, when a child decides to engage in a literacy experience, that is to say when "the [child] perceives that the locus of causality is internal to his or her self" (p. 327), this behavior is considered self-determined. In this project, I examine these theories while considering the importance and value of promoting children's literacy experiences that are enjoyable, interesting, authentic, and, as much as possible, self-initiated. I explore the issues of children who struggle in terms of their early literacy skill acquisition, and how to support the development of these skills in the home environment.

Introduction to the Literature Review

In order to gain a better understanding of how to promote strong early literacy skills at home among children who may be experiencing difficulties, I explore the literature examining different types of support that children receive in their home environments as they struggle with early literacy skill development. More specifically, I review research carried out by Bingham (2007) and others who examined the importance of the instructional quality of parent-child dialogue in literacy-focused interactions as well as in everyday interactions. I also explore other types of support including the affective climate within parent-child literacy experiences (Lukie et al., 2014); support provided by older siblings who serve the role as an MKO (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002); and the type of reading material used in literacy experiences at home (Neumann, Hood, Ford, & Neumann, 2011).

Rationale and Importance

While beginning my research on this topic, I came across a quote: “The secret of it all lies in parents’ reading aloud to and with the child” (Huey, 1908, p. 148). Edmund Burke Huey was a prominent educational psychologist in the early twentieth century and an author of the influential book *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* that considered literacy from a scientific perspective. Huey’s quote was intriguing for me in that it led me to ask many questions in order to gain a better understanding of whether early literacy skill development is really as simple as Huey presented it. More specifically, I pondered whether there were certain types of books or even other types of reading material that are more beneficial than others. I questioned whether or not it is beneficial to have a discussion with children about the story. All of these wonderings led me to the understanding that the support provided to children within their home environments is so unique (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). It was this understanding that prompted my inquiry into the current topic.

The topic is important to me on a personal level as my 7-year-old son struggles with literacy skill acquisition and development. I see his peers advancing at a quicker pace, and I know his literacy skills are not strong enough based on the feedback and concerns shared by his teacher that include low grades on his report card and her suggestions to read books beyond those that are sent home on a daily basis. At home, I observe that he has no interest in reading, and he resists any attempts I make to have him read to me. He complains that it is hard and that he is not a good reader, and hearing this devastates me. I strive to change his self-image to be that of a competent reader so that he might enjoy the beauty of quietly reading a story in bed to settle down at night. I can support him more effectively by exploring research that focuses on different types of support offered within the home environment that have been found to result in

enjoyable and rich literacy learning. I then hope to use this information to ensure that his home literacy experiences are positive in order to increase his motivation that in turn could change his approach to (and fear of) literacy. This topic is also important because I feel that part of my role as an early childhood educator is to be able to confidently and competently provide parents with research-based evidence in order to help them support their children's early literacy development.

I have realized that the parents of the students I teach would clearly like to support their children's early literacy development, but many are not sure where to start. Knowing that many parents do not have the time to read the magnitude of articles that I scoured through nor the access to academic, peer-reviewed research, the current project serves as a comprehensive summary of relevant research that is written with the intent to provide parents with information that they may use as they help their children develop strong early literacy skills.

The knowledge gained from this project may also assist other educators by increasing their awareness of the topic with the hope to provide more effective support for the parents of the students in their classrooms.

Purpose and Guiding Questions

The purpose of this project is to examine relevant research to gain a deeper understanding of the different types of support in the development of early literacy skills that may be available for a child to receive at home. Inspired by my son's struggles with literacy, and through an examination of different types of support, I hope to put forth recommendations that I can apply in my own home environment with my son and that other parents may also use with their children.

The main question that guides the current paper is, “In what ways do children’s home environments, in terms of the degree and quality of support offered to children during literacy experiences that take place at home, foster the development of their early literacy skills?” More specifically, “In what ways can parents and caregivers provide optimum support for the development of their children’s early literacy skills in their home environments?”

Summary of Project

In this first chapter, I introduced the current topic and provided the context and background that led to my interest in and selection of the topic. I laid the groundwork for the theoretical frame that serves as the foundation upon which I build in subsequent sections and presented an introduction to the review of the literature. Finally, I discussed the rationale and purpose of my topic that prompted my guiding questions. I address these questions throughout the paper. In Chapter Two, I discuss in greater depth the theoretical frameworks that were briefly introduced and that guide and inform my examination of the current topic. I review the literature on the instructional quality of parent-child dialogue, the affective climate within parent-child literacy experiences, siblings as MKOs during literacy activities, and the different types of reading material that might serve as the focus for literacy experiences at home. In Chapter Three, I connect my personal and professional experiences with the reviewed literature by sharing my observations regarding an association between the support children receive at home and early literacy skill development. I also introduce and describe a website I created that serves as a point of contact through which I may share relevant findings and recommendations with parents and other educators. In Chapter Four, I conclude the project by reflecting on the findings, identifying limitations, and suggesting possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework that guides this project. I then examine the literature to examine the role that the types of support provided to children within their home environments play in the development of children's early literacy skills. Among specific topics examined, I consider the instructional quality of parent-child dialogue, the affective climate within parent-child literacy experiences, siblings as literacy support, and the type of reading material used in literacy experiences at home.

Theoretical Framework

My examination of the current topic is grounded in socio-cultural perspectives, and more specifically, in social constructivism. According to social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), the manner in which children attend to and construct their own meaning is paramount in the learning that results. An equally important component of social constructivism is the environment in which children are raised and the social interactions that they experience (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory recognizes the important role that social interactions play in children's construction of knowledge, and as an extension of this theory as it applies to the current topic, young children learn literacy skills through the social exchanges they share with their families. When children connect with their environment and with others in meaningful ways, the learning that is associated with rich interactions and supported by MKOs is maximized (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this theoretical framework, the notion of the ZPD relies on the assistance of MKOs as children acquire and refine their literacy skills, and this serves as a major thread throughout the project to support an examination of how the types of support

provided to children within their home environments and early literacy skill development may be interrelated.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), “environment” is a term that includes not only the proximal factors of a child’s immediate family and home setting, but also increasingly distal, less direct influences including values, ideologies, and belief systems that vary across income levels and cultures (Goelman et al., 2006). The theory emphasizes the interrelatedness of children and their environments, and highlights how children are influenced by their family as well as how the family is influenced by the children. For example, parents’ beliefs and practices influence their children’s literacy development just as children’s development of skills in this particular domain can have an impact on how parents support their children’s early literacy development (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described five systems: The first system, closest to the child, is the microsystem which consists of the interactions that take place with a child’s immediate setting, including their home environment. Still proximal to the child, the mesosystem considers the relationship between two elements within a child’s microsystem, for example, between their home environment and their school. More distal to the child, the exosystem influences the child, but only indirectly. An example of this system might be the parents’ workplace and, more specifically, how happy (or unhappy) parents are in their jobs or where any knowledge gained as a result of work experience might positively influence how parents interact with their children, (e.g., teachers or social workers). At the most distal level, the macrosystem encompasses the influences of culture, politics, and the social, legal, and economic landscape. Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) chronosystem considers the element of time in terms of life transitions that might occur,

including starting school, moving, or a death in the family. For the purposes of this project, I consider the topic of early literacy mainly through Bronfenbrenner's microsystem that considers the more immediate influences within a child's life.

Motivation and Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan (1985; 2008) and Vallerand et al., (1992) discussed that motivation fuels the desire to complete any task, whether cleaning the dishes or hugging a loved one. With regards to the process of learning a new skill, Vallerand et al. stated that, "one of the most important psychological concepts in education is certainly that of motivation" (p. 1004). Motivation theory distinguishes between two different types of motivation: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the desire to complete a task purely for the enjoyment that engaging in that task brings (Deci et al., 1991). An example of this type of motivation includes a child who enjoys reading because cuddling up with a parent to read a nice story right before bed makes him feel safe and loved. Extrinsic motivation considers the drive to complete a task for the sake of the end result or consequence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An example of this kind of motivation would be if children carried out a writing task only because of the sticker they receive upon completion of the task. Motivation theory is pertinent to this project because when children are intrinsically motivated (Vallerand et al., 1992), they are interested in and enjoy reading and writing just for the sake of it and not because they will be later rewarded or compensated for the activity. Motivations will, of course, vary among children, and self-determination theory provides a tool to facilitate the process of understanding the influences behind children's motivations (Deci & Ryan, 2008). When we provide children with opportunities to engage with literacy experiences that are authentic and interesting to them, their intrinsic motivation leads them to freely and willingly decide to engage in these activities, and

this behavior is said to be self-determined and to have come from within (Deci et al., 1991).

Motivations towards engaging in literacy activities may be either nurtured or stifled depending on the type of support provided to them within their unique home environments.

Review of the Literature

Within the context of children who struggle with their early literacy skills, I have chosen to discuss four types of support provided to children within their home environments, and as a result, I have divided this review into four sections: Instructional quality of parent-child dialogue; affective climate within parent-child literacy experiences; siblings as literacy support; and type of reading material focused on during literacy experiences at home.

Instructional Quality of Parent-Child Dialogue

In this section, I explore how the quality of dialogue that occurs during literacy experiences as well as during everyday interactions might be related to the development of children's early literacy skills, and especially for children who struggle in this area. Whether children read or write with siblings or parents, the degree to which the interaction is considered instructional will vary (Anderson, Anderson, Lynch, and Shapiro, 2012). For example, if a book is simply read from beginning to end with no discussion or time taken to enjoy the activity, this would be quite a different experience than if a child was encouraged to be an active participant by answering open-ended questions related to the story (Ewers & Brownson, 1999). Bingham (2007) found that shared reading experiences that were high in instructional quality - as characterized by pausing to label the pictures, asking open-ended questions about the story, and connecting the content to the child's life - were related to children's print and letter knowledge. Similarly, two studies found that when parents encouraged their children to actively participate during shared literacy experiences through the asking of open-ended questions, children's

comprehension of new words (Walsh & Blewitt, 2006) and their tendency to use these new words (Ewers & Brownson, 1999) improved. In contrast, a study by Anderson et al. (2012) found no relationship between children's early literacy knowledge and the kind of questions parents asked their children. At the same time, conversations occurring outside of shared reading experiences, including during a meal, were found to be significant to children's development of literacy skills in a study conducted by Dickinson and McCabe (2001). In fact, Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, and Poe (2003) and Dickinson and McCabe (2001) reported that when dialogue included the parents' use of rich language and when children were encouraged to participate, this served to strengthen children's oral language that, in turn, strengthened their literacy skills.

Affective Climate within Parent-Child Literacy Experiences

A study conducted by Lukie et al. (2014) examined the importance of collaboration in parent-child interactions and concluded that when both children and parents were interested in the shared reading experience, children's learning potential was maximized. In similar research examining how the quality of shared reading experiences might be related to children's early literacy skills, Baker, Scher, and Mackler (1997), Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein, and Serpell (2001), Hood, Conlon, and Andrews (2008), and Sonnenschein and Munsterman's (2002) findings were similar to those of Lukie et al. regarding the importance of children's interests in the development of literacy skills; their findings revealed that positive and supportive social-emotional literacy interactions had an effect on children's reading motivations (Baker et al., 1997; Hood et al., 2008; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002) and on children's perceptions of reading (Baker et al., 1997; Baker et al., 2001). One of these studies (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002) found that there was no association between the social-emotional quality of

shared reading experiences and children's literacy skills, including phonological awareness, orientation toward print, and story comprehension. At the same time, Lukie et al. asserted that one aspect that might contribute to the affective climate within a shared literacy event is the degree of interest as children might be more willing and content to read and write about a topic that is of interest to them. The same study found that when children were able to learn through an exploration of their interests, they demonstrated increased attention, and improved goal setting and processing, all of which led to more positive learning experiences. This finding connects to motivation theory in that when children enjoy reading and writing, and especially when it focuses on a topic in which they are interested, they are intrinsically motivated to engage in that task for the joy and pleasure they experience (Deci et al., 1991; Vallerand et al., 1992).

Siblings as Literacy Support

Siblings have been found to engage in literacy-based activities together including shared reading (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002), and the effectiveness of this partnership has been examined in the literature (Gregory, 1998; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Williams & Gregory, 2001). Two studies (Gregory, 1998; Williams & Gregory, 2001) looked more closely at the specific strategies used by siblings during literacy experiences. One study found that older siblings used effective mediational techniques including explicitly modeling reading strategies and asking text-based questions following the reading session (Gregory, 1998). In the same study, older siblings also used echoing and repetition strategies, and provided younger siblings with time to repeat a word correctly before continuing with the story. Furthermore, older siblings were found to incorporate "real and accurate" literacy-related content, such as learning about homophones, into play situations including playing school (Williams & Gregory, 2001, p. 258). Despite these optimistic results, a different study (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002)

explored the idea of siblings as MKOs in literacy experiences and found that the affective climate was less positive when children read with their older siblings than when they read with their parents. This finding was determined by analyzing scores that measured reading expression, physical contact with the sibling, appearance of involvement, and the older sibling's sensitivity to the younger child's level of engagement.

Type of Reading Material used in Literacy Experiences at Home

In order to understand how the type of material that is focused on during literacy experiences might play a role in supporting children who struggle with their early literacy skill development, I selected three diverse types of reading materials to examine: Storybooks, environmental print, and digital materials. The first type of reading material that I discuss is traditional storybooks.

Storybooks. Storybooks are abundant in “rare” words that one does not typically come across during everyday conversations at home (Aram & Aviram, 2009; Hassett, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2001). More specifically, Sénéchal and LeFevre (2001) reported that children learned roughly two new words from each shared storybook reading, making it a very rich and enjoyable literacy experience. In storybooks, word choices are often playful, rhythmic, and have the potential to paint a mental picture (Hassett, 2008), and according to Tsao (2008), fosters children's imaginations. There are opportunities to reconstruct events from within the story and then extend those events to include children's own life experiences, deepening children's comprehension and personal connections. These discussions are considered to be more cognitively-demanding interactions than those that are limited to book-centered conversation (Mol & Neuman, 2014; Neuman, 1996). Storybook reading was also found to support children's mathematical literacy (Anderson et al., 2005). In fact, Anderson et al. highlighted that through

the use of adjectives, gestures, and comparison, and by tracing the illustrations, children acquired and used mathematical vocabulary in a meaningful context that then facilitated their understanding of the associated meaning of these terms.

The first type of reading material I discussed was books, however there are many different options that are available to children and their families. The next type of reading material that I consider is one that we might come across in our everyday activities, known as “environmental print.”

Environmental print. Environmental print is defined as “surrounding non-continuous print (e.g. words, letters, numerals and symbols) that is encountered in a particular context and fulfills real-life functions” (Neumann et al., 2011, p. 232). This type of print is relatively stable and unchanging, and ubiquitous, and is therefore an ideal form of print that all parents can use in literacy experiences with their children (Neumann, Hood, & Neumann, 2009; Neumann et al., 2011). Furthermore, environmental print provides a non-threatening option to parents with lower levels of reading proficiency; the logos and graphics found within environmental print provide cues to parents that can assist them in confidently exploring print with their children (Neumann et al., 2009). A study by Neumann, Hood, and Ford (2013) found that children who used environmental print during instruction exercises were more motivated to engage in reading and writing activities and enjoyed these literacy activities more than children who used regular black and white print. After two months, the group who trained with the environmental print was able to identify more words in standard print than were the children who initially learned with standard print (Neumann et al., 2013).

Environmental print is a type of reading material that is in a form other than a book. The next type that is considered is a tablet, which is a touchscreen computer with which the user can interact through many different types of applications (“apps”).

Digital materials. In a study examining the effectiveness of iPads (a brand of tablet created by the software company “Apple”) as a tool to support early literacy skill development (Flewitt, Messer, & Kucirkova, 2015), children’s use of an iPad was associated with an increase in their intrinsic motivation to engage in literacy activities. This finding was corroborated by one teacher who noticed that a certain child who did not usually draw was content to use a tablet for this task (Couse & Chen, 2010). While interacting with literacy apps, or software programs whose focus is to support the development of reading and writing skills, the immediate feedback enabled children to correct their errors and also guided their subsequent responses (Flewitt et al., 2015). It is important to note that there are reading apps that provide the option of reading the story to children, and oftentimes the words will be highlighted as they are being spoken, that provide children with connections between printed and spoken words (Beschorner & Hutchison, 2013).

In their study about using iPads as a literacy tool, Beschorner and Hutchinson (2013) identified many writing apps that are available to children to support the development of their emergent writing skills as they draw, scribble, or produce letter-like symbols, all of which are precursors to more developed and sophisticated writing skills. The option to use the keyboard connects with the notion of scaffolding by supporting young children’s early attempts at writing when forming letters with a finger or stylus on the touch screen is too challenging (Beschorner & Hutchison, 2013). It was found that providing children with the opportunity to explore and play

with writing and drawing apps evolved and led to an interest in creating written projects including a story (Beschoner & Hutchison, 2013).

Summary

In Chapter Two I examined Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and notions of ZPD and MKO, as well as Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory as a framework to examine the extant literature and research on how a child's early literacy skills develop within the contexts of their own home environments and how the development of these skills can be supported among children who struggle in this area. In Chapter Three, the next chapter, I connect the research-based findings with practice by illustrating through my personal and professional examples the role that the types of support provided within children's home environments play in early literacy skill development.

CHAPTER 3: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In this chapter, I connect my personal and professional experiences to the theoretical frameworks previously discussed and also to the literature reviewed examining the role of the types of support provided to children who struggle with the development of their early literacy skills within their home environments. More specifically, I use the theories and research findings to support my analysis of examples of the types of support provided to my son in his home environment and how they are related to his early literacy skills development, more specifically in terms of his ability to encode and decode print as well as his motivation to engage in these activities. I also share a scenario from my professional experiences within the classroom to further illustrate the value of children's motivation with regards to literacy activities. Finally, I introduce and discuss a website I created in conjunction with this paper that can be used to share relevant findings and recommendations with parents and other educators.

Connecting Literature to Practice

I consider myself fortunate to be able to draw from both my personal and professional experiences in the hopes of making deep connections to the literature that I discussed in Chapter Two. Revisiting my guiding questions stated in Chapter One, I ask "In what ways do children's home environments, in terms of the degree and quality of support offered to children during literacy experiences that take place at home, foster the development of their early literacy skills?" More specifically, "In what ways can parents and caregivers provide optimum support for the development of their children's early literacy skills in their home environments?" In this chapter, I strive to draw connections between the literature reviewed and examples I draw from scenarios based in my own home as well as those that I have observed in my classroom.

In the next section, I present four scenarios based on my experiences with my 7-year-old son's literacy activities within his home environment next.

The Role of Siblings and Games

Due to my intimate knowledge of my 7-year-old son, Carter and of his immediate environment, I have the opportunity to observe and document the different types of support provided to him within his environment and connect them with theories and research findings in order to determine how they might have played a role in how his early literacy skills have developed. Just like his father and me, Carter loves being at home and spending time with his family. We prefer to live quiet lives, so we do not participate in many extracurricular or social activities, and we tend to spend most of our evenings and weekends at home playing games together. This quiet lifestyle gives Carter and his 9-year old sister, Maya, a lot of time to play with one another which they do amicably. Throughout the year, we spend several weekends with my parents or with my sister and her family up at their cottage and these visits are often spent playing games all together.

Carter loves receiving any attention from his sister and Maya loves to play school, so they can often be found setting up a classroom where Maya is the teacher and Carter is the student. On one particular occasion, Maya wrote a test for Carter to complete, and because she is familiar with his lack of enthusiasm for anything related to reading and writing, she knew she needed to focus on a topic in which he is interested. As a result, her test required Carter to answer questions about quadcopters (a multirotor helicopter), which is a new interest of his following my husband's purchase of this impressive flying gadget. Carter eagerly sat at his "desk," read Maya's questions, and wrote out his answers (see Appendix A). The authentic and undirected play-based literacy events described in this experience resonate with Sonnenschein

and Munsterman's (2002) findings that siblings tend to naturally engage in literacy-based activities together, as I often find Maya and Carter spontaneously incorporating literacy into their play. Carter approached literacy activities more enthusiastically when the activity was focused on a topic in which he was deeply interested. To me, Carter's enthusiasm is in tune with Vallerand et al.'s (1992) earlier discussion on intrinsic motivation and the importance of embracing children's interests. This is in order for them to willingly participate in an activity simply because of the enjoyment inherent in the task itself. Carter was invested in the role-playing scenario that he and Maya created and he has also been interested in anything related to quadcopters. He was enthusiastic about engaging in this literacy activity due to the enjoyment he derived from it, not for some extrinsic motivation (Vallerand et al., 1992). I also connect this experience to the characteristics of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) microsystem that focus on interactions that take place within a child's immediate setting. This playful and authentic experience that Carter shared with his sister was a wonderful opportunity to practice his literacy skills. I believe it would not have occurred had he not had an older sibling, specifically one who knows him so well, who enjoys literacy, and who is patient and supportive of his efforts.

On another occasion, Maya and Carter began making paper airplanes together. This activity evolved after Maya suggested they write secret messages to each other and fly the planes across the house to deliver the messages. Maya first wrote one to Carter and flew it to him which he eagerly read with a little bit of support from her. Once he had decoded the message, Carter sat down and crafted his own message (written partially in French) that echoed the sentiment that was in her message. This scenario is another example of how naturally Maya and Carter incorporate literacy into their play (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002), and it also

highlights the significance of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory as the role that Carter's experience in French immersion plays in his early literacy skill development.(see Appendix B).

Similar to the scenario described above, this experience also exemplifies Sonnenschein and Munsterman's (2002) finding that siblings naturally incorporate literacy into their play as this rich activity authentically evolved without any agenda or adult intervention. This experience is also in support of Gregory's (1998) finding that older siblings use effective strategies while supporting their younger siblings during literacy experiences. One strategy that was observed in this study was how older siblings did not provide support right away but rather gave their younger siblings a chance to work it out on their own first. When Carter had difficulty reading Maya's airplane message, she gave him a few seconds to decode the word on his own before helping him with it. This selective support Maya provided to Carter enabled him to work within his ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Reading the entire message was beyond what Carter was capable of doing on his own. This example connects with the notion of scaffolding as Maya supported Carter during this experience in her role of the MKO by reading a couple of the difficult words to him, thereby facilitating his ability to successfully complete this challenging task.

Another recent event highlighted the role that the support Carter receives at home has played in the development of his early literacy skills. Our family often watches the show "The Amazing Race" where teams follow clues that lead them to different locations where they need to complete a task before they receive their next clue. We were visiting my sister at her cottage with her three children, her husband, and my parents. We organized our own "Amazing Race" where my husband and I wrote down a clue that led to a task that needed to be completed by each team, at which point they would receive the next clue that would bring them to the next task, and so on. Carter was partnered with his grandfather and uncle, and when the race began, I

assumed that he would pass the clue to one of his teammates to read aloud to him because of his tendency to avoid literacy activities when possible. However, Carter took the initiative and claimed the role of “clue reader,” confidently making his way through the message while receiving a little bit of support from his teammates when it was required. A few weeks later, Carter and Maya created their own “Amazing Race” by writing out their clues and then guiding my husband and I along the course (see Appendix C). All of these rich literacy experiences occurred because of the sociocultural context that makes up Carter’s environment. My husband and I understand the value in and importance of making time to spend with our children, and we often spend an afternoon playing board games or engaging in activities including this “Amazing Race.” Furthermore, I have realized that having an older sister provides Carter with a partner in play who is also an MKO who can support him during authentic literacy experiences.

As the previous example illustrated, although Carter resists any explicit activity that involves reading or writing, when literacy is authentically incorporated into an enjoyable activity he will eagerly participate. Another example of such an activity is a video game called “Minecraft” (a game that enables players to build constructions out of textured cubes) that Carter plays with Maya and their dad. The three of them all play together in the game while on their own computers and they can send typed messages to each other. They have made a bit of a game of sending secret notes to one another. Literacy is an enjoyable component of this game for Carter, and as a result, he is intrinsically motivated to carefully construct a silly message for his sister and to decode her response to him, thus echoing Vallerand et al.’s (1992) earlier findings about the importance of harnessing children’s interests in order to nurture their desire to participate activities because of the pleasure they derive from them. At times, Carter struggles with a certain word, and his dad supports him by breaking it down for him into distinct sounds so

that Carter is still able to feel and be successful. On his own, Carter may find it difficult to complete the task, but the assistance provided by his dad enables him to work within his ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). I also connect this scenario with Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory, and specifically to the exosystem that encompasses a child's indirect influences, including how a parent's professional experiences might affect their interactions with their children. Carter's exosystem plays a role because my husband is a software developer, so his knowledge of various computer programs has enabled him to create this virtual network, and his need to have several computers in the house means that we have enough computers for the three of them to play on. This collection of elements that makes this ongoing literacy experience possible would not necessarily be in place in all children's home environments where parents have different professions.

One last scenario relates to Carter's experiences with more explicit reading activities. Since Carter's enrollment in kindergarten, I have tried to make a point of engaging in shared reading where he reads me a short leveled-reader that tend to focus on rhymes and words from the same rhyme family (Hassett, 2008). Unfortunately, these books often lack some or all of the qualities in "good" books (e.g., an ability to evoke an emotional response, an understandable plot that flows, well-rounded characters, rich language, and an ability to challenge children cognitively) (Aram & Aviram, 2009). Although I tried to find books on a topic in which he was interested, they were not always terribly exciting and he often complained when it was time to read. Knowing that I needed to find a way for Carter to feel more positive towards reading, I tried a reading app on the tablet called "Farfaria" that has hundreds of books on many different subjects. This app allows Carter to choose any book he likes, and he can have the story read to him first while each word is highlighted. This form of scaffolding discussed by Wood et al.

(1976) provides Carter with additional support to facilitate the goal of reading the book independently, which he might not have been able to do without this assistance. Following the shift from leveled-reading books to using the tablet, Carter was much more enthusiastic towards our shared reading time and he willingly participated in the activity. This change in his outlook towards reading echoes Flewitt et al.'s (2015) finding that children's motivation and concentration increased while interacting with tablet-based literacy activities.

I use this scenario also to illustrate the role of a child's exosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1994), that, as previously mentioned, considers indirect influences (in this case my own academic pursuits and experiences in the workplace) that may play a role in a child's development. In Chapter One I outlined the reciprocal nature of the systems within Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory where not only do our environments shape us, but we also have an influence on our environments (Sontag, 1996), and this has certainly been true for the support I have provided to Carter. In my dual role as an early childhood educator and a parent, I have been able to promote Carter's early literacy development with the knowledge and skills I acquired through training. In turn, Carter's struggles with his early literacy skill development prompted my specific interest in the topic for the current project that may further benefit the type of support I provide to him during literacy experiences. This support has recently been guided by the articles I read and the discussions I have with both my academic and professional colleagues. More specifically, I learned about "Farfaria" from a professional conference board at my workplace where we share resources with one another. I became aware of the benefits of incorporating the tablet into literacy experiences after reading and discussing the Flewitt et al. (2015) article that reported children's increased intrinsic motivation while engaging in literacy activities on the tablet. My interest in using the tablet as a focus for literacy activities

contributed to positive experiences where Carter was able to successfully and independently read a book. This success then fueled his motivation towards future literacy encounters with the tablet and it also affirmed the value and importance of my ongoing search for different literacy resources.

In the next section, for the purposes of further illustrating the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory and the importance of children's motivation on the development of their early literacy skills, I connect with my professional experiences by sharing my observations on the development of early literacy skills of one child in my classroom.

Classroom Experiences

In working in a kindergarten classroom, I have come to realize that Carter's struggles with his early literacy skills are not uncommon. In the scenarios I explored in the previous section regarding Carter's literacy activities at home, I discussed the importance of intrinsic motivation in his feelings towards these activities. In this section, I share my experiences with a child in my classroom that highlight the role that extrinsic motivation can play as a child engages in literacy activities.

Aiden is 6 years old and he struggles with his early literacy skills as evidenced by his frequent reversals in the letters in his name and in his difficulty in independently reading the daily message, a class routine followed since the beginning of the school year. Through my systematic observation and documentation of Aiden's reading and written work, I have also noted his lack of motivation during literacy activities demonstrated by copying the work of his friends, repeatedly asking if he is done an activity when he has only spent a few moments, and resisting the attempts to spell a word on his own. On one particular occasion where a few children wanted to deliver some of their work to the principal to be displayed, I reminded them

that the principal will only hang children's very best work, so they needed to make sure to take their time. Aiden wanted to tell the principal about the birthday party he had gone to the previous weekend, so he sat down at a table, wrote about the party, and drew a picture of the birthday cake. Aiden often includes only the initial letter for each word that he is writing, although in this writing activity he included two and three letters to represent each word. He also included spaces in between several words where he does not usually leave any. This scenario is in line with Vallerand et al.'s (1992) discussion on motivation theory in that Aiden's extrinsic motivation for his work to appear on the principal's wall was so great that he was inspired to take his time and carefully write about his own experience, where he expanded on his usual form of writing that includes connecting each word with only one letter to represent its initial sound. Furthermore, this scenario illustrates the importance of Deci et al.'s (1991) self-determination theory because this literacy activity was self-initiated; Aiden could have chosen not to engage in it, but his motivation to complete work that would be hung on the principal's wall was strong enough that he wanted to apply himself beyond his usual level.

After determining a source of motivation to engage in a rich literacy experience at school, I sent home a note letting Aiden's parents know about the exciting event. His parents had previously expressed concern for what they felt was a lack of interest in reading and writing, so I knew it was important to share this with them. I informed them about how Aiden's motivation pushed him into wanting to engage in the activity, and it also helped him to work harder while writing than I had ever seen before, which included taking the time to listen for and record more than one sound for each word. The mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory considers the links between settings in an individual's environment, including home and school, and I experienced the benefits between Aiden's parents and myself as communication is an

important part of his mesosystem. It is because of the connections that I have made between my home and school experiences that I realize even more clearly how important it is to provide children with an environment that is supportive of their early literacy skills. These connections are represented in Bronfenbrenner's (1994) mesosystem that considers the links between different settings among an individual's environment. At the same time, the microsystem within Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory focuses on the activities and interactions that occur within a child's immediate environment, including their home, and as illustrated by the previous scenario with Aiden's participation in the authentic and self-determined literacy activity, it is important for children to be provided with similar literacy opportunities at home in order to harness their motivation to engage in meaningful literacy experiences.

Having made connections between theoretical frameworks, the research findings reviewed, and my personal and professional experiences, and in light of my guiding questions, I now introduce and discuss the website I created for parents and educators.

Children's Early Literacy Website

As an early childhood educator and a parent of a child in the early primary years, I appreciate being able to access information on a certain topic at a time that is convenient for me. I also appreciate recommendations of useful and accessible resources should I choose to explore a topic more deeply. With this in mind, I created a website for parents as a way to share relevant findings regarding the development of children's early literacy skills and to put forth recommendations of how they might be able to help their children enjoy reading and writing, and perhaps even strengthen their children's early literacy skills. It is also important for me to learn how the site can be improved or how the information and recommendations may have been

helpful to parents and their children, so I have included a section where parents and educators can leave comments and share ideas.

I have entitled the website “Home Sweet Home: Supporting the Development of Children’s Early Literacy Skills.” I designed it to be approachable and user-friendly by incorporating relevant images and by summarizing and presenting the research findings in plain language so that parents do not feel overwhelmed or that it is too scholarly. I present the theoretical frameworks that were used to support the current project: ecological theory; sociocultural theory; and motivation and self-determination theory. I share the results of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two by summarizing the research findings on the types of support provided to children within their home environment. Each type of support is discussed on its own page within the website: The Instructional Quality of Parent-Child Dialogue (in the website I call this “Instructional Quality of What we Say”); Affective Climate within Parent-Child Literacy Experiences (this is called “What we Don’t Say” in the website); Siblings as Literacy Support; and Type of Reading Material used in Literacy Experiences at home (called “What to Read”). Each point is supported with cited research, and a full list of references is provided to facilitate parents’ access of the articles. I put forth recommendations to parents regarding how they can support their children’s healthy early literacy skill development. I also make connections between the role of a supportive environment in fostering children’s motivation and self-determination when there are signs of struggling with the acquisition of early literacy skills. In the Resources section, I suggest websites, blogs, and books for parents, all of which are directed towards early literacy skill development, and I also provide recommendations for storybooks, tablet apps, pattern books, and wordless narratives that parents can use as a focus during shared reading experiences with their children. The website is directed towards parents,

although it could also be useful to educators as a resource to refer parents to when they are seeking additional literacy support for their children. Appendix D contains screenshots of several pages within the website.

Summary

In Chapter Three, I connected the theoretical framework and literature I reviewed in Chapter Two with my personal and professional experiences. Specifically, I discussed several scenarios that illustrate the importance of the support provided within children's home environments and I made connections to the previously-reviewed theories and literature related to the role that different types of support provided to children can play in the development of early literacy skills. Finally, I introduced and briefly discussed a website I created that serves as a point of contact for parents to easily access relevant research and evidence-based recommendations regarding how they can promote their children's early literacy skill development. In Chapter Four, I present a brief summary and reflection on this project, its limitations, and directions for future research and practice.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

In this project, I explored the role that different types of support provided to children within their home environments play in the development of early literacy skills. Through an examination of the literature and by connecting relevant research to my personal and professional experiences, I considered several specific types of support provided to children within their home environments to explore how they might be related to early literacy skill development. Throughout the process of exploring this topic, I was encouraged to learn that there are many different ways families can support young children as they develop early literacy skills.

In this chapter I review my reflections and concluding thoughts on the current project. I also discuss its limitations, suggest directions for future study and research, and put forth recommendations for parents seeking ways to support their child's optimal early literacy development.

Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

Reflecting on the current project, I return to my first guiding question, "In what ways do children's home environments, in terms of the degree and quality of support offered to children during literacy experiences that take place at home, foster the development of their early literacy skills?" I have understood how, with the assistance of MKOs, children are able to work within their own ZPD while engaging in explicit literacy activities such as reading a book or while enjoying play-based activities of which literacy is a part (Vygotsky, 1978). Regardless of the type of the literacy activity, it is the guidance from an MKO which supports the strengthening of children's early literacy skills. My review of the literature has shown that the instructional quality of conversations between parents and their children during literacy interactions as well as

those independent of literacy activities are important and connected to early literacy skill development (Bingham, 2007). More specifically, I have gained a deeper understanding of how early literacy skills are benefitted through cognitively-challenging dialogue and by encouraging children's active participation in literacy activities. Furthermore, I have learned that the affective climate of literacy experiences between parents and their children has been found to be related to children's motivations and overall feelings toward reading (Hood et al., 2008). It makes sense that when the emotional tone surrounding a literacy activity is positive and warm, children will be more inclined to want to participate in these activities in the future. Another way that children's home environments foster the development of early literacy skills is when an older sibling serves as an MKO to provide support during literacy activities. Older siblings have been found to use effective strategies during authentic play situations (Gregory, 1998), and this finding is certainly in line with what I have observed of Carter and Maya's home-based literacy activities.

In considering my second guiding question regarding how parents and caregivers can provide optimum support for their children's early literacy development in their home environments, I was encouraged to learn concrete ways to create a positive and supportive environment to nurture children's motivation towards literacy-based activities. Part of creating a positive and enjoyable atmosphere includes encouraging children's active participation in reading experiences as well as during casual everyday conversation in order to nurture their early literacy skills. In connecting with sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978), I have found that tapping into children's interests and finding ways to incorporate an element of literacy into the activities that they enjoy are wonderful ways to inspire children to become active learners. This objective can be realized by incorporating literacy into play and by ensuring shared reading

experiences are always positive and enjoyable. Considering my personal appreciation of literacy as a means of enjoyment, it is my hope that the findings and recommendations that I share in my website (Appendix D) provide all parents and educators with ideas and tools they may use to create rich and enjoyable literacy experiences for young children.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study and Practice

This project was limited in scope to a restricted number of types of support provided within children's home environments that have been found to be related to the development of early literacy skills. This list is not necessarily exhaustive, and although the types of support I selected were those that seemed to recur during my preliminary review of the literature, it is certainly possible that other types of support are also related to development within this domain. For those that I chose to focus on, including the instructional quality of parent-child dialogue, the affective climate of parent-child literacy experiences, siblings as literacy support, and the type of reading material used in literacy experiences at home, I found the literature was extremely rich and varied, and although the volume of research I came across made it challenging to be selective and focus on a manageable number of studies, it also allowed me to confidently address my guiding questions. One area I was particularly interested in was how children's motivation levels might be connected to the development of their early literacy skills, although I found that there was a dearth of literature on this specific topic.

One aspect related to early literacy which I was not able to explore in greater detail is how children's early literacy skills develop while enrolled in a bilingual program in school, including French immersion. I limited my literature review to the examination of literature that focused on examples of literacy support for children exposed to only one language.

Directions for Future Study and Research

Drawing from my findings from the literature, I believe that it is important that future study explores parents' literacy levels and disposition towards literacy with their children including reading, writing, and numeracy (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2016) to gain a deeper understanding of the development of children's early literacy skills. The topics of learning literacy through play (Roskos & Christie, 2001) and the relationship between frequency of reading opportunities and children's early literacy skill development (Aram & Aviram, 2009; Hood et al., 2008) were two aspects that were present in the literature, but that went beyond the scope of this project. Also, when engaged in shared reading experiences between children and MKOs, exploring other types of print including leveled-reading books (Hassett, 2008; Long, 2004), wordless narratives (Arizpe, 2013; Lindauer, 1988; Serafini, 2014), and pattern books (Hassett, 2008; Neuman, 1996) would provide for a more comprehensive understanding of how the type of reading material is related to the development of early literacy skills. Given children's ever-increasing use of computers and digital materials (Common Sense Media, 2013), it is possible that literacy skills are evolving to include more technological competencies (Anderson, Anderson, Hare, McTavish, & Prendergast, 2016) that might result in different recommended activities for children and MKOs to engage in together at home. Therefore, an examination of these less traditional literacy methods could prove worthwhile. In connection to the dearth of research on how children's motivation levels towards literacy activities might be associated with the development of their early literacy skills, a deeper analysis of this topic may be important. Lastly, in order to gain some insight into how participating in a bilingual academic program (OCSB, n.d.), including when one has a different alphabetic or phonetic system, might be related to the development of children's early literacy

skills, it would be prudent to explore this aspect in more detail (Bialystok, Luk, & Kwan, 2005; Durán, Roseth, & Hoffman, 2010).

Recommendations for Practice

For the parents and educators of children who are in a bilingual program, it is important to be mindful of the complexities that might come along with learning two languages. From my experience as a parent and educator within a French immersion program, children are expected to read and write in both languages at a specific level by the end of each grade in order for them to be able to learn more advanced vocabulary and concepts prescribed in the following grade (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009); however, this approach does not always support children's individual learning styles and characteristics.

I believe that it is important for parents to view themselves as capable educators of their children who are able promote their children's early literacy skill development. This can be facilitated by educators providing parents with concrete recommendations for example, using literacy apps on tablets to help increase children's intrinsic motivation to read, incorporating literacy elements into games at home, and keeping reading fun and enjoyable for their children. It is also important that educators respect and support different ways that families work with their children to support early literacy skill development and draw from their own funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Throughout my experiences in working with families of kindergarten children, I have come to the realization that many parents worry that if they do not have a strong background in or knowledge of early childhood education or teaching literacy, they are not "qualified" to engage in reading activities. By providing suggestions of how parents can effectively support their children's early literacy skills development, educators can empower parents to believe that these skills can flourish at home. Examples of these

suggestions include having conversations with children using rich language, accessing community literacy programs, and playing letter games with environmental print while eating breakfast or grocery shopping. I also believe that information needs to be more accessible to parents who might not know how the quality of their interactions with their children plays a role in the development of these skills. It is my hope that the website I created for this project fills a gap in accessible knowledge by providing parents with a free and unintimidating summary of relevant research findings as well as recommendations they may use to support the development of their children's early literacy skills.

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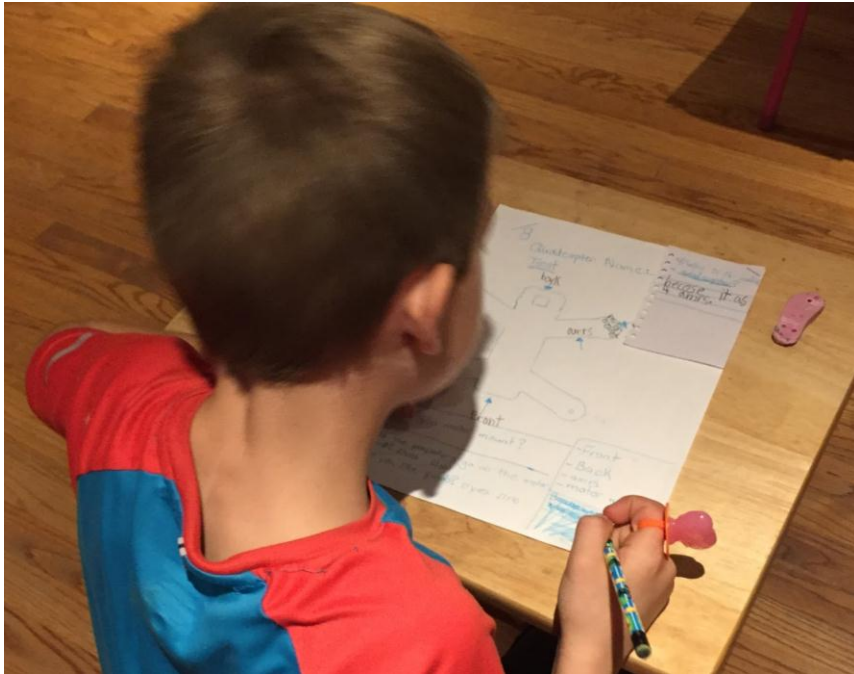
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APPENDIX A

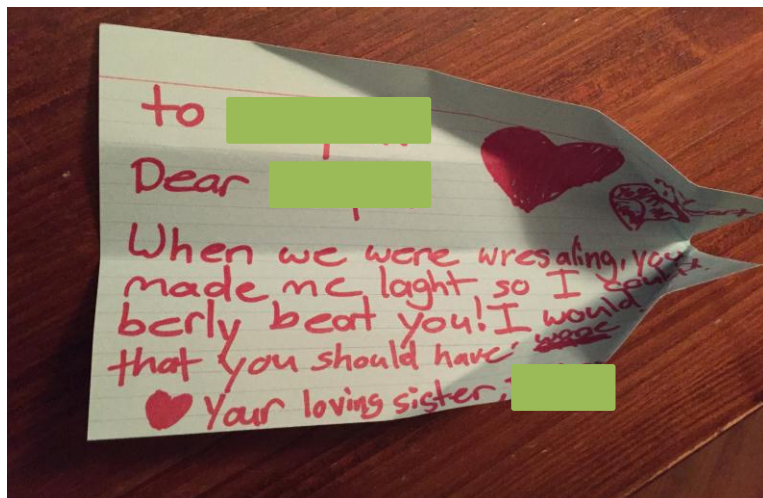
Photo of Carter Writing Maya's Test

Photograph obtained with assent from C. Gaylord. Photograph taken by Danielle Gaylord (2015).

This is Carter writing Maya's test on quadcopters. He had to label the diagram and respond to other questions including "Why is this called a quadcopter?" His answer (that you can see in the top right corner) was "becose it as 4 arms" (because it has 4 arms).

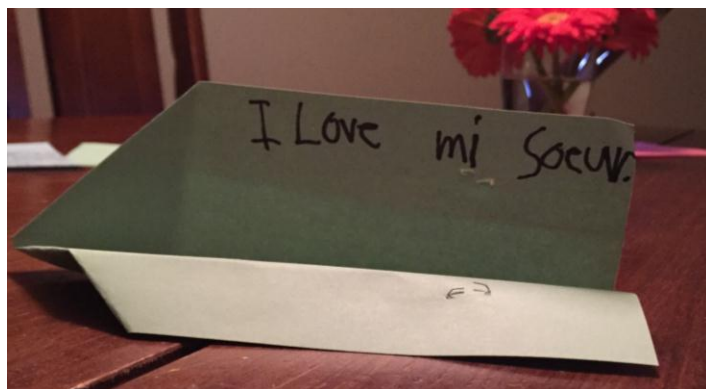
APPENDIX B

Photo of Carter's and Maya's Airplane Messages



Photograph obtained with assent from M. Gaylord. Photograph taken by Danielle Gaylord (2015).

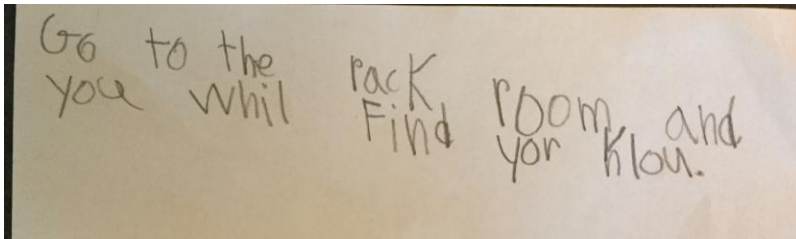
This is Maya's secret airplane message to Carter. He eagerly read it by slowly making his way through one word at a time while Maya helped him when he got stuck.



Photograph obtained with assent from C. Gaylord. Photograph taken by Danielle Gaylord (2015).

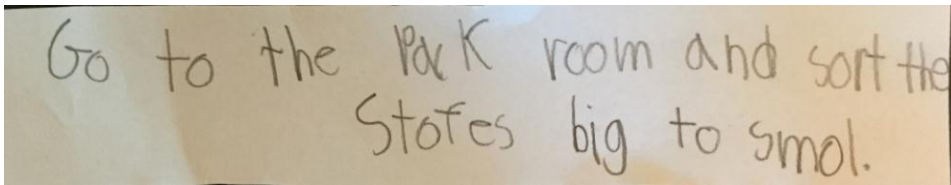
This is Carter's response to Maya's secret message. Note the influence of his French immersion.

APPENDIX C

Photo of Carter's Clues for his "Amazing Race"

Photograph obtained with assent from C. Gaylord. Photograph taken by Danielle Gaylord (2015).

Here is Carter's first clue for the Amazing Race that he designed. It reads: Go to the pink room and you will find your clue.



Photograph obtained with assent from C. Gaylord. Photograph taken by Danielle Gaylord (2015).

Here is one of the tasks that we had to complete:
Go to the pink room and sort the stuffies big to small.

APPENDIX D

Children's Early Literacy Website

<http://childrensliteracy1.weebly.com/>



ABOUT THIS SITE

Welcome to "Home Sweet Home: Supporting the Development of Children's Early Literacy Skills."

Within this site you will find a summary of research findings on types of support provided within the home environment to children who struggle with the development of their early literacy skills. You will also find recommendations that are based on research about how you can help your child become more confident and capable in this area. In the "Feedback" section, I invite you to share any success stories, ideas, or comments for how the site can be improved.

This website was created as a component of my capstone project in the Master of Education in Early Childhood Education program through the University of British Columbia. I was inspired as an educator and as a parent of a child who also struggles with his own early literacy skills. My main guiding question which inspired the project was, "In what ways do children's home environments in terms of the degree and quality of support offered to children during literacy experiences that take place at home, foster the development of their early literacy skills?" More specifically, "In what ways can parents and caregivers provide optimum support for the development of their children's early literacy skills in their home environments?"

The main purpose of the project and this site is to share relevant research findings in the hopes of helping parents support the development of their children's early literacy skills. As an extension, this site might also be useful for educators as a tool to assist parents who might benefit from additional information and practical recommendations. I sincerely hope you find some valuable and useful information which will help you support your children as they develop and strengthen their early literacy skills.

You can make your way through the site by using the menu headers at the top, or by clicking on the orange or blue buttons on each page. Please click on the orange "Get Started" button to begin the journey.

SIBLINGS AS LITERACY SUPPORT

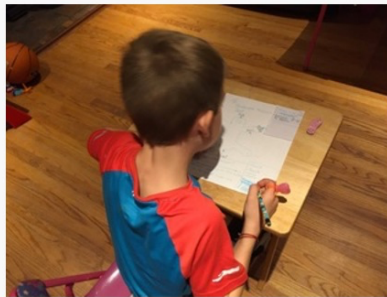


Storytime with his Sister! by Kaleb Fulgham, under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- Siblings have been found to use effective supportive strategies during literacy activities (Gregory, 1998; Williams & Gregory, 2001).
- The emotional tone was found to be lower when children read with their older siblings than when they read with their parents, so this would certainly be something to be mindful of (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002).

As an example of how one sibling can engage another in wonderful literacy activities, I am including a photo of my son writing a "test" that his sister made for him while they played school. The test focused on quadcopters because my daughter knew that she had to make it interesting in order for her brother to want to complete it.



Photograph obtained with written consent from C. G. Photograph taken by Danielle G. (2015).

LETTERS ARE ALL AROUND



[Sign Warning](#) by StillWorksImagery, under [CC0 1.0](#)

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- Also known as "environmental print," this kind of print can be found almost anywhere, making it the perfect option for all parents (you can read with your child while you're in the car, having breakfast, or getting groceries) (Neumann, Hood, Ford, & Neumann, 2011; Neumann, Hood, & Neumann, 2009).
- This kind of print is usually large, bold, and colorful, so children are often excited to talk about it and try to read it (Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2013).
- Environmental print is approachable for all reading levels for children and adults; logos can help to figure out what the words might say (Neumann, Hood, & Neumann, 2009). Also, there aren't as many words as there are in a book, so it isn't as intimidating.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Putting research findings into practice, here are some tips on how you can help support your children learn how to read and write.



3 Siblings by fluffster (Jeanie),
under CC BY-NC-ND-2.0

READING SUPPORT

- Encourage your child to read with peers. This could be either an older sibling, cousin, neighbour, or friend.
- In addition to peers, libraries that offer free literacy programs are a great option. [Here](#) are some free programs offered through the Ottawa Public Library. Check with your community or local library for programs that offer family storytime sessions.

KEEP IT POSITIVE AND FUN

- Reading doesn't have to involve sitting quietly with a book. Many computer games involve reading messages or short instructions.
- While browsing the television program guide, encourage your child to help you find their favourite show.
- Using tablets or wordless picture books are great options for engaging and reading with your child because they offer different reading levels for all users.
- Use words on cereal boxes or street signs to play letter games. This kind of print is all around, and it invites spontaneous and casual literacy experiences which will likely feel more enjoyable than planned lessons.
- When children struggle with their literacy skills, helping them to engage in literacy activities that they find interesting will increase their motivation to continue to do so in the future.
- Incorporating an authentic literacy component into self-initiated activities will also help children who struggle as the motivation to engage in the activity is already established and it came from them. As a result, children will be more active participants and therefore their learning will be deeper and richer.



Woman and Young Girl in
Kitchen with Laptop and
Paperwork Smiling by GSCSNJ,
under CC BY-NC 2.0

HAVE GOOD CONVERSATIONS



Love, Child, Family by
marcisim, under CC0 1.0


- Talk with your child, not only during reading, but also in the car, on the bus or train, while eating dinner. Talking can help increase children's vocabulary and this helps their ability to read later on.
- Ask your child *wh*-questions often. These are the *why*, *what*, *who*, *when*, *how* questions that will get them talking more than questions where they can answer with a simple one-word, yes or no. [The Center for Early Education at Eastern Connecticut State University](#) provides short videos which demonstrate examples of these types of questions.
- Tell a story about your day, and use lots of detail about who was involved, where it took place, and how it made you feel. These kinds of conversations expose children to rich and vibrant language.

FEEDBACK AND RECOMMENDATIONS


I would love to hear how this site might have helped you better support your child as he or she strives to become a stronger and more confident reader and writer. Please share any ideas or "success stories," or make suggestions regarding how this site can be improved.

SHARING SUCCESS STORIES

[My feed](#) [All posts](#) [Log in](#)

 Channels

General

 Online

1 anonymous

FEEDBACK FORM

Name *

First

Last

Email *

Comment *

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