

## CHAPTER 6

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# **ENGAGING CHILDREN IN THE APPROPRIATION OF LITERACY:**

## **The Importance of Parental Beliefs and Practices**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Becoming literate is a process of appropriation. The young child must acquire both a set of skills and knowledge of when and how to utilize these skills. Becoming a reader requires the development of phonological analysis skills, letter knowledge, sound-letter correspondence, and comprehension skills (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Although formal schooling plays an important role in a child's acquisition of these skills, children begin the process of literacy appropriation before ever setting foot through a school door (Adams, 1990; Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995). The experiences that a child has at home, such as being read stories, learning about the world through outings, having dinnertime conversations, help the child acquire early literacy skills such as learning about story structure, analyzing sound patterns in words, learning letters, even before formal school-based instruction starts (Baker et al., 1995). These early literacy-related

skills, in turn, foster later literacy development. The process of learning to read goes fairly smoothly for many children in our society, particularly middle income children; however, it does not work quite as well for many low income children (Snow et al., 1998).

Earlier accounts of systematic group-based differences in literacy outcomes relied upon social address models, such as ethnicity and/or low income, as explanations for the differences. Such approaches failed to disentangle income/ethnicity from confounding factors, such as possible limited literacy skills of the parents, poor quality schools, and language differences between home and school. Such approaches neglected to sufficiently consider the importance of the child as an agent in his or her learning. More important, using social address as an explanation failed to explicate the processes involved in literacy acquisition. In addition, a social address approach neglected to account for variability among members of a particular group. Moreover, such an approach did not lead to effective programs to facilitate literacy acquisition for all children.

In the past 15 or so years we have made some headway moving away from a social address model explanation of differences among children's literacy skills to one more likely to result in effective educational practices for all children. Attention has been given to the importance of a match between the worlds of home and school which has enabled us to increase our understanding of the range of literacy-related activities available in the homes of all children. Researchers also have begun to focus on the processes involved in literacy appropriation by considering the child an agent in his or her socialization and by expanding our understanding of the importance of social context.

Implicit in the concept of literacy appropriation is the notion that in order to learn to read the child must want to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills (Snow et al., 1998). Thus, any review of how children learn to read must address how it is that children become engaged in the process. In this chapter I will review the role that a child's home environment plays in literacy appropriation by considering parents' beliefs about the importance of literacy and how literacy skills are acquired as well as the nature of literacy-relevant activities that a child experiences at home. In discussing each issue I will review sociocultural differences, when there are known differences. It is important to realize, however, that although there are some differences in children's literacy development related to sociocultural group, research showing relations between parental beliefs, practices and children's development are independent of a sociocultural group.

The theoretical orientation that informs this review reflects several contemporary developmental perspectives. Development occurs in a context of overlapping and interdependent contexts or systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In order to understand a child's literacy development one needs to

examine the interrelations among the contexts in which a child spends time (e.g., home and school). Children's development is influenced by their sociocultural background (Vygotsky, 1978). Children appropriate literacy knowledge in a social context through their interactions with others (Rogoff, 1990).

This chapter focuses only on parental beliefs and what goes on at home. In order to fully understand how children learn to read, however, one must consider both what occurs at home and what occurs at school as congruence between a child's home experiences and what is expected of that child at school is very important (Sonnenschein & Schmidt, 2000). In fact, a mismatch between home and school is thought by many to account for certain children's failure to acquire literacy skills. However, there is much controversy in opinion as to how to bridge the gap between home and school; some researchers advocate training programs to improve parents' literacy skills and teach them how to read with their children; other researchers specifying a need for schools to better reflect the desires, goals and experiences of children in their community (see Purcell-Gates, 2000, for a review).

The thesis to be presented in this chapter is that a key element in helping a young child learn to read is engaging the child's interest. One way to engage a child's interest is by fostering a sense that literacy is a source of pleasure. Helping a young child find reading pleasurable is at least partially a function of parental beliefs about literacy and its acquisition as well as the nature of activities that children engage in. The beliefs that parents have about reading and learning to read may influence the activities they make available to their children and how they interact with their children while engaging in these activities. Children themselves play a role in the process by selecting certain activities over others.

The thesis that serves as an organizational tool for this chapter is consistent with a burgeoning body of research on influences on children's motivations for learning (see Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997 for a review of this literature). For example, Gottfried, Fleming, and Gottfried (1998) have shown the positive long-term impact of a cognitively stimulating home environment on children's intrinsic interest in learning to read. Parents of 8-year-olds completed questionnaires about the type and amount of cognitive stimulation available at home. Children of these parents were given a battery of tests assessing their interest in learning math and reading when they were 9, 10, and 13 years old. Growing up in a stimulating environment positively predicted children's motivation at each age, regardless of socioeconomic status of the family.

There appear to be some systematic differences in the approaches taken by parents for helping their children learn to read which may play some role in these children's subsequent literacy development. The differences

in approaches may reflect systematic differences in parental beliefs about the nature of literacy and how to facilitate its development. Differences in beliefs about literacy, in turn, may influence the choice of activities made available to children and how one engages in the activities.

As will be reviewed in more detail in subsequent sections, a consideration of activities relevant for literacy acquisition needs to move beyond just the nature of an activity. One also needs to consider the child's interest in an activity. Storybook reading is currently thought to be one of the better ways to facilitate young children's reading development. Discussion of the efficacy of storybook reading has typically focused on the skills it can foster. However, as will be discussed in this chapter, some of the efficacy of storybook reading may be due to fostering a child's interest in the reading process rather than direct skill inculcation (Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein, & Serpell, 2001).

### PARENTAL BELIEFS

Parental beliefs are considered an important topic because parental beliefs are thought to influence parental practices which in turn influence children's developmental outcomes (Miller, 1988). The nature of the activities that parents engage in with their children and the patterns of interaction may reflect, at least in part, parental beliefs about education and children's learning. Thus, parental beliefs about how children learn may influence both the nature of the activities made available to children as well as the form of the interaction while engaging in an activity (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Super & Harkness, 1986). Parental beliefs initially may stem from a parent's cultural background and history (Ninio, 1980; Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996) but over time can come to reflect aspects of the individual child (e.g., child's perceived needs and strengths; Hastings & Rubin, 1999).

Inquiry into parental beliefs about literacy development is limited. Instead research has focused on parental practices with beliefs, at times, inferred from practices. Research on parental beliefs often attempts to document sociocultural patterns of beliefs. However, the extant research often conflates ethnicity, income and parental literacy level. There has also been insufficient attention devoted to intergroup variability.

Three types of parental beliefs that may be especially important for children's succeeding in school, particularly in the area of reading, are: ideas about the importance of education, notions of how children learn, and expectations for parental involvement in the schooling process (Sonnenschein & Schmidt, 2000). Although almost all parents stress the importance of education, there appear to be differences related to sociocultural

background in how parents socialize their young children for school (Baker, 1999; Baker et al., 1995). These differences among parents appear to continue once their children enter school (see Sonnenschein & Schmidt, 2000).

### **Importance of Education**

Almost all parents stress the importance of their children receiving a good education (Sonnenschein et al., 1997). Thus, a difference in the emphasis placed upon an education cannot account for systematic group-based differences in how children succeed in school. In fact, there is some evidence that parents of children at-risk for not succeeding in school place greater emphasis on the importance of an education than do other parents. For example, several researchers have found that many African American or Hispanic parents have high educational aspirations for their children and are supportive of any attempts made by schools to teach their children, even ones considered by many to be developmentally inappropriate (see Sonnenschein, Brody et al., 1996).

Despite emphasizing the importance of their children's getting an education, there are differences related to sociocultural identity in how parents view the utility of certain educational skills and ways to foster these skills. Sonnenschein et al. (1997) report data from the Early Childhood Project, a 5-year longitudinal study of young children's reading development which started when the children were in prekindergarten. Participating families were selected from neighborhood public schools in Baltimore City serving either low income or middle income African American or European American families. Parents participated in several in-depth structured and semi-structured interviews. Children's early literacy and literacy skills were assessed annually. Parents and children were also observed completing several literacy activities. As part of a series of ongoing interviews, parents were asked when their children were in preschool or kindergarten, "What do you believe is the most important reason for learning to read? Other reasons?" The most common categories of responses given were daily living activities, getting an education, employment, empowerment. Middle income families were significantly more likely than low income families to mention that reading was important for learning.

Support for findings of some group-based differences in parents' views on the importance of literacy comes from ethnographic observations of different types of literacy activities engaged in by families. For example, Teale (1986) observed literacy activities in the homes of 22 low income families. Focal children in the families were between 2.5 and 3.5 years. Although families participated in a wide array of literacy-related activities,

the most common was daily living routines. Shared storybook reading was a far less common occurrence.

Sonnenschein et al.'s (1997) findings are also consistent in some ways with Fox's (1990) explanation of one possible cause of low income children's difficulties learning to read. She suggested that parents of these children may view literacy in a different manner than parents of children more likely to succeed in school, "Even though literacy is an integral part of everyday household routines ... the parents frequently do not associate reading and writing with work-related or leisure-time activities" (p. 6). According to Fox, the children in such families may come to view literacy as the domain of school and not something engaged in outside of school.

Other research has shown that despite having high aspirations for their children's learning, certain groups of parents are less likely to foster what many teachers consider necessary foundational skills prior to their children's entering school (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Sonnenschein et al., 1996; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Although these parents think school is important and want their children to get a good education, they also are less likely than others to believe their children will necessarily attain educational success. In fact, many of these parents' children do have difficulty learning to read once they start school.

Findings that children are entering school lacking skills viewed as important by teachers convey an implicit message that the child and his or her home is deficient in certain ways. Such a notion does not seem the best basis for establishing a positive working relationship between home and school. In contrast, certain theorists and researchers argue that as most children do have exposure at home to a broad array of literacy-relevant activities, the onus is on schools to devise programs that capitalize upon the knowledge children bring with them when they enter school (Auerbach, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey Gaines, 1988). Clearly, additional research is needed to better understand what skills children do have upon entry to school and how to build upon them as well as how the attitude that parents have about literacy influences what is learned.

### **How Children Learn**

There appear to be some systematic differences related to sociocultural background in how parents think learning to read should be facilitated. Although there are individual differences, it appears that low income parents espouse a more traditional didactic approach to fostering literacy acquisition than do middle income parents. Note that it is income, and those factors correlated with income, more than ethnicity that seems to be the relevant factor across the various studies.

Early research on children's learning often focused on the age at which children were expected to acquire certain cognitive or social skills. Expected milestones are of interest because parents who expect earlier attainment of skills report introducing activities which can foster skill development at an earlier age than those who do not expect such early attainment (Ninio, 1979). In contrast, parents who underestimate their children's cognitive capabilities may not provide appropriate experiences for their children which in turn can hinder the children's development (Ninio, 1980). Middle income parents generally reported that cognitive skills develop earlier than did low income families (Ninio, 1979).

DeBaryshe (1993) found a positive relation between maternal beliefs, age of child when activities were introduced and children's language development. She explored the nature and frequency of reading activities engaged in by mothers and their 2-year-old children and these children's oral language skills. DeBaryshe concluded that mothers' beliefs about how children learn and their goals for their children were the best predictors of how old children were when their mothers first started reading to them. The age of the child when a mother began reading to him or her was the best predictor of the child's subsequent receptive language skills.

More recent research on parents' beliefs about the approach that should be taken when helping children learn to read has shown systematic group-based differences in the emphasis given to traditional didactic approaches. Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, and Eggers-Pierola (1995) interviewed 14 low income single mothers of different ethnicities repeatedly over a three-year period about their socialization goals for their preschool children. A key objective for these mothers was getting their children ready to enter school. The mothers expected the daycare providers at their children's day care centers to engage in didactic lessons emphasizing basic literacy and numeracy skills. Unlike many middle income mothers and educators who favor a more child-centered approach, these mothers reported not seeing any relation between play and learning. Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano, and Daly (1995) reported that the majority of their adolescent African American low income mothers espoused a similar view of literacy learning for their preschool children. These mothers reported reading to their children in order to teach them letters, numbers and knowing right from wrong. Learning letters was viewed by many of these mothers as an important benchmark of development. Most of the mothers, although not all, stressed the importance of an emphasis on skill instruction in preschool to foster children's acquiring knowledge of letters.

Stipek, Milburn, Clements, and Daniels (1992) asked parents of children in late preschool or kindergarten to complete a questionnaire about appropriate ways to teach basic skills to their children. They also asked parents what activities the children engaged in at home. The sample of 551

parents was fairly diverse in terms of income and ethnicity. In addition to interviewing parents, children were observed in their classrooms. The findings showed that parents expressed a coherent set of beliefs about how to teach this age group. Some parents emphasized skills instruction within a traditional teacher-controlled classroom. Other parents emphasized a more child-centered approach. The set of beliefs expressed by parents was related to their educational level with less educated parents emphasizing more of a skills-based approach than better educated parents. Parents espousing more of a skills-based approach were more likely than other parents to report having their children use flash cards and workbooks to learn relevant skills. The approach to education espoused by the parents was related to the type of school chosen by these parents for their children, when such choice was available.

A similar set of findings comes from the work of Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) who interviewed 181 parents of beginning kindergartners about what parents can do to help their children learn in school. As part of the interview each parent was given a literacy test. Although most parents thought that literacy learning can begin in preschool, the nature of instruction advocated varied according to the parents' literacy level. Parents whose own literacy skills were low were more likely than those with higher literacy skills to emphasize the use of flash cards and similar types of materials for teaching reading. Parents with higher literacy skills tended to disavow the use of such tools. Parents whose reading skills were low emphasized direct teaching of literacy skills to their children whereas parents whose reading skills were higher tended to reject a skills-based approach but were more likely to discuss nurturing their children's literacy development. Parents with higher literacy skills also talked about the importance of being role models for their children. Parents whose reading skills were low never mentioned this, perhaps because they felt they did not know how to be good role models or perhaps because they themselves did not find reading rewarding. The authors concluded that parents with higher reading skills tended to view literacy as a cultural practice not just simply something learned in school, a view that was not shared by the parents with low literacy skills.

An emphasis on direct inculcation of skills also was noted by Delpit (1986) in discussing her experience as a new teacher in an inner-city school. Parents of Delpit's African American students wanted her to teach their children how to read using a traditional approach that emphasized skills. In fact, it was not until Delpit switched from an approach which emphasized whole language and authentic texts to a more traditional didactic model that her students started showing progress. This suggests that the skills-based approach advocated by many low income parents may reflect, at least in part, a correct assessment of their children's learning needs.

Goldenberg (2001) explained the skills inculcation approach practiced by low income Latino parents in his research as reflecting what the parents believed learning to read meant. The parents in the Goldenberg, Reese, and Gallimore (1992) study interacted in a similar manner with their children regardless of whether they read storybooks or completed workbooks. Goldenberg suggested that these parents viewed learning to read as mastering decoding skills rather than appropriating meaning from text and that a skills inculcation approach was consistent with such a viewpoint.

A recent line of research has considered what could be viewed as the opposite of a skills-based approach, one focusing on a child's engagement and interest as a basis for early literacy development. As part of the Early Childhood Project described in an earlier section, parents were asked a series of questions tapping their beliefs about how preschool or kindergarten-aged children learn to read. One of the questions asked, "What is the most effective way of helping your child learn to read?" Responses were scored as reflecting either an entertainment or a skills orientation. An entertainment orientation focused on children's engagement in and enjoyment of literacy activities. Parents emphasizing an entertainment orientation discussed the importance of reading with children and making the interaction enjoyable. A skills orientation stressed the deliberate cultivation of skills, often through the use of flash cards or workbooks. Parents also kept a diary for a period of a week listing all the activities children did over the course of that week. Activities were coded as emphasizing an entertainment or skills orientation. Another coding category, daily living, is not considered in this paper. Additional information about the parents' orientations toward fostering literacy in their children was collected when the children were in second grade. Parents rated the importance of various activities for children's learning to read. Activities included those more in keeping with an entertainment orientation and those more in keeping with a skills orientation. The major difference between parents from the four sociocultural groups occurred in their emphasis on direct inculcation of skills as a means of fostering literacy in their children. Although there was some variability across findings from the three measures, middle income European American families were significantly less likely than low income families of either European American or African American ethnicity to favor a skills orientation. Middle income African American families generally also emphasized a skills orientation, although not always as much as the two low income groups (Sonnenschein, Baker et al., 1997; Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000). As will be discussed in a subsequent section, an orientation toward literacy learning that emphasized a child's engagement and interest was positively related to later literacy development, an orientation that focused on skills inculcation was not.

### **Parental Beliefs about Their Involvement in Their Children's Schooling**

Parents are considered to play an important role in facilitating their children's appropriation of literacy by providing relevant experiences before children start school and by reinforcing school-based learning activities at home once children are in school. According to Sonnenschein and Schmidt (2000), parental involvement in children's schooling is important beyond just increasing children's exposure to literacy-relevant activities. Parental involvement also conveys a message to the child about the importance of school and conveys a message to the teacher that this parent cares about how her child does in school. If teachers think that parents do not care about how their children are succeeding in school or think that parents are not supporting and reinforcing what is learned at school, the nature of instruction or amount of attention given to the child may suffer (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991).

Middle income parents tend to spend many hours reading with their preschool children and engaging in other experiences such as taking children to the library that both foster a notion of literacy as entertaining and help the child develop literacy-related skills. As the child transitions into elementary school, middle income parents continue to be involved in their children's schooling by helping with homework and by supporting the school. Although there are differences depending upon ethnicity, many low income parents seem less outwardly involved in their children's schooling than do their middle income counterparts (Sonnenschein & Schmidt, 2000). Group-based differences in parental involvement can be due to differences in parental beliefs about their role in their children's education, differences in a sense of self-efficacy to teach pertinent skills to children and differences in the schools' push for involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). As reviewed in Sonnenschein and Schmidt (2000), there is a fairly large research literature showing some differences across sociocultural groups in parents' beliefs about their role in their children's schooling. Even when parents believe they should play a role, whether they do can be a function of their sense of self-efficacy as instructors for their children.

The research reviewed here shows that parents have a coherent set of beliefs about the importance of education, especially reading, and how to help children learn to read. There are some differences related to sociocultural group, however, in the approach advocated by parents. Parents from low income groups are more likely than those from middle income groups to endorse an approach to learning that stresses direct skill inculcation. This difference in approach may reflect parental beliefs about the role of and importance of literacy in their lives.

### THE TYPES AND NATURE OF LITERACY-RELEVANT ACTIVITIES AVAILABLE AT HOME

Much research has been conducted showing the impact of various literacy-related activities on young children's reading development (e.g., see Baker, 1999; Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998 for reviews). Most studies on this topic have focused on the frequency with which a child engages in an activity, either alone or with others. Recently, however, theorists have acknowledged that in order to fully understand the impact of an activity on a child's literacy development, we also need to consider affective elements of interactions with others as well as the child's interest in the activity (Baker et al., 2001). Considering the nature of interactions is especially relevant given that most children do have exposure at home to some literacy-relevant activities suggesting that frequency alone is probably not the correct explanation of differences in literacy development. The research presented in this section focuses mainly on the social/affective aspects.

Storybook reading is probably the activity most often recommended by researchers and teachers as important for facilitating children's reading (Purcell-Gates, 2000). In fact, Marilyn Adams (1990) suggested, in her discussion of how children learn to read, that without the many hours that children spend reading with their parents even before starting school, young children would flounder once they do enter school. Frequency of storybook reading has been shown to increase children's early literacy knowledge (Baker, 1999) and indirectly predict later reading activity and literacy development (Baker et al., 2001). However, the exact magnitude of the effect as well as what aspects of storybook reading foster what aspects of early literacy knowledge are still debatable (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Although storybook reading is considered important for literacy development, the frequency of engagement in this activity varies by sociocultural group (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). These differences in reported frequencies are often used to explain differences in literacy skills among children when they enter school. Just as children vary in how frequently they read, the parents of these children may vary in how frequently they themselves read. Fox (1990) suggested that parents of at-risk children, in particular low income parents, may not engage in reading activities and thus not provide their children with strong literacy role models. On the other hand, research by Purcell-Gates, L'Allier, and Smith (1995) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) shows that there is much variability across families within a group in the frequency with which they engage in reading activities.

It is not only storybooks that are important to literacy acquisition. As Baker (1999) and others (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 1996; Snow et al., 1998) have noted, there are many other activities that may be relevant for early literacy or later reading skills. For example, playing certain word games can foster phonological awareness. Using various forms of printed matter may foster an awareness of the uses and meanings of print. Certain forms of oral language usage, such as dinner time conversation, may familiarize a child with the narrative structure found in books. Even television shows can both increase one's world knowledge and improve narrative understanding.

Research on the nature of storybook reading interactions has focused mainly on the type of discussion about a book that occurs while reading. In general, researchers have found that the type of talk, particularly talk that goes beyond the immediate text, fosters later comprehension skills (Snow et al., 1998). However, reading a book with someone is a social interaction and social-affective aspects of the interaction should be considered as well as cognitive aspects. In fact, in trying to understand the impact of different literacy-related activities on children's reading development, Sonnenschein et al. (2000) suggested that one should consider (1) the nature of an activity and the cultural artifacts used when engaging in the activity; (2) the affective quality of an interaction; and (3) whether an activity is child- or parent-initiated.

Sonnenschein et al. (2000) noted that all the children in their study had frequent opportunities to engage in activities relevant for literacy acquisition based upon parental reports when children were in kindergarten and first grade. The data revealed few, if any, sociocultural differences in the frequency with which children engaged in various activities. However, a qualitative analysis of the data indicated differences in all three of the previously mentioned factors between children who became good readers and those that did not. Children who became good readers in first, second and third grades were more likely to use printed matter as part of their play in kindergarten than children who did not. Similarly, positive affective interactions with printed matter when children were in kindergarten were more characteristic of the interactions for those children who would become the better readers. Children who became better readers were more likely to have initiated interactions involving print when they were in kindergarten whereas those who did not become as good readers were more likely to have those activities initiated by adults. Thus, it was differences in the nature of interactions rather than differences due to sociocultural group that predicted later reading development.

In a somewhat similar vein, Frijters, Barron, and Brunello (2000) investigated the relation between home literacy, children's interest in engaging in literacy activities and children's early language and literacy skills. Children were in kindergarten but not yet independent readers at the time the

study was conducted. Of interest here is that children's reported interest in engaging in reading activities was positively related to their ability to identify letters and know the sounds of the letters. It was not related to phonological awareness or to frequency of engagement in literacy activities at home, as reported by these children's parents.

Other research from the Early Childhood Project has considered the cognitive and affective nature of reading interactions between mothers and their preschool or first grade children (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Baker et al., 2001). Sonnenschein and Munsterman found that the affective quality of a dyadic reading interaction when children were in preschool predicted children's subsequent motivations or interest in reading when they were in first grade. Baker et al., (2001) showed that the affective nature of dyadic reading interactions when children were in first grade predicted the frequency with which these children read chapter books in third grade. Frequency of reading chapter books predicted third grade reading skills. Relatedly, the type of discussion between the mother and her first grade child that occurred during the reading interaction was related to affective quality of the interaction which in turn predicted the frequency with which the child later engaged in reading activities. The affective quality of the reading interactions did not directly predict subsequent reading skills. Baker et al. (2001) concluded that the impact of affective quality on reading is indirect; that is, it fosters an interest in reading more often which in turn can lead to improved skills (see also Bus, 2001). Similarly, Leseman and de Jong (1998), in a broad-based longitudinal study of multiethnic Dutch families and their children which started when the children were 4 years and continued until they were 7, found that a positive social-emotional climate was related to the number of literacy opportunities available in the home and to the amount of talk during book reading about non-immediate story content. The social-emotional climate during reading interactions observed when children were between 4 and 6 years of age was not related, however, to children's reading skills assessed at age 7.

Elliott and Hewison (1994) also focused on the importance of reading interactions that foster children's interest. They investigated how families from different sociocultural backgrounds help their children with reading and which style of interaction is most beneficial. They interviewed the families about the types of literacy-related activities their child engaged in and observed parent/child storybook reading interactions when the children were 7 years old. The child's success in reading, based on the number of mistakes the child made when reading with the parent, was positively related to a parental helping style which emphasized comprehension and interest. According to Elliott and Hewison, middle income parents displayed an interactional reading style that emphasized the meaning of the

story rather than just focused on their child's acquiring reading skills. "Middle class children generally had access to a range of interesting storybooks and this was likely to increase their motivation to read and foster understanding of the principle that it is possible to read for pleasure" (p. 216). In contrast, "Many of the working class had little exposure to literacy in the home ... For many of the lower income families the overall orientation tended to be on reading as an exercise rather than reading for meaning. The emphasis was on accuracy rather than comprehension and interest" (p. 217).

Goldenberg et al.'s (1992) findings with low income Latino parents were similar to those of Elliott and Hewison. As previously mentioned, the families in the Goldenberg et al. study read Spanish storybooks to their children as if they were completing a workbook.

On the other hand, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines' (1988) ethnographic findings with low income families containing children successfully learning to read shows the need to consider intragroup variability. The children in these families were exposed to a wide range of activities including storybook reading. Descriptions of the nature of these events clearly indicated that interactions went beyond an emphasis on skills inculcation to include appropriating meaning from text.

Before concluding this section on literacy activities, one note is in order. Many researchers, in considering activities that children engage in at home, survey the number of books or other forms of literacy-relevant artifacts in the house. For example, Elliott and Hewison (1994) talked about the number of storybooks found in the homes of middle income children. Presumably, people in a home with literacy-relevant artifacts will be more actively engaged in literacy activities than those in a home with few or no literacy-relevant artifacts. It is important, however, to distinguish between artifacts found in the home and the child's actual engagement with the artifact or observation of someone else's engagement with an artifact (Purcell-Gates, 2000). In a study based on observations of children and families from 20 low income homes, Purcell-Gates (1996) found a positive relation between children observing parents engaged with printed matter and having parents orient their children to print while so engaged and the children's scores on measures of early literacy, such as a Concepts of Print task.

#### **THE RELATION BETWEEN PARENTAL BELIEFS, AVAILABLE LITERACY ACTIVITIES AND CHILDREN'S LITERACY APPROPRIATION**

This section is further subdivided into one on the relation between parental beliefs and available activities and one on the relation between parental

beliefs and children's literacy appropriation. The research to be reviewed demonstrates a relation between parental beliefs and both available activities and children's literacy appropriation.

### **Parental Beliefs and Available Activities**

Although there is not much research on this topic, what has been done reveals a positive relation between the approach to literacy endorsed by parents and the activities their children engage in. Parents who emphasize children's engagement and enjoyment as important for fostering early literacy acquisition seem to provide their children access to activities consistent with such an approach. Sonnenschein et al. (1997), based on data from the Early Childhood Project, found a positive relation between parents' endorsement of an entertainment approach to early literacy and the reported frequency with which they and their kindergarten-aged children read storybooks together. Parents having an entertainment perspective also spontaneously reported in a diary that their child engaged in more activities consistent with such an orientation.

Sonnenschein et al. (2000), also working with data from the Early Childhood Project, found positive correlations between parents' endorsement of an orientation toward literacy that focused on engaging or entertaining the child and the frequency with which their children engaged in activities that could be considered consistent with such an approach (e.g., playing word games, board games). In contrast, there was a negative correlation between parents who emphasized a skills-based orientation toward reading acquisition and engagement in "entertainment-type" activities or in storybook reading. There was a positive relation between parents endorsing a skills orientation and their children's using workbooks, reviewing flash cards and partaking in related activities.

DeBaryshe's (1995) findings also illustrate the relation between parental beliefs and engagement in literacy activities. Her findings are based on a series of studies conducted using mothers and their preschoolers. The families came from different income and ethnic groups. Mothers completed questionnaires about their reading activities, beliefs about how reading is learned, and their self-efficacy as their children's teachers. Mothers were also asked about their children's interest in reading. Reading interactions were taped and subsequently coded for the affective quality and the type of direct reading instruction used. Mothers' literacy orientation was related to their educational background and their socio-cultural group. Mothers with a stronger literacy orientation reported providing their children with a broader range of and more frequent reading

experiences. Mothers with a stronger literacy orientation also tended to engage in more discussion with their children during reading interactions.

### **Parental Beliefs and Children's Literacy Appropriation**

Research on this topic also has been limited. What has been done has either focused on children's early literacy skills (e.g., phonological awareness, orientation toward print), reading skills (word recognition, reading comprehension) or motivation.

Sonnenschein et al. (1997) found that parents' endorsement of an approach toward literacy focusing on entertainment and engagement was positively related to children's scores on measures of early literacy when these children were in prekindergarten and kindergarten. More specifically, an entertainment approach was significantly and positively related to children's phonological awareness and knowledge about printed matter. A skills approach was either negatively or not at all related.

Sonnenschein et al. (2000) extended the previously reported findings by considering the relation between parents' orientation toward fostering young children's literacy development, the nature of activities children engaged in when in kindergarten and children's early literacy and reading scores. Children's reading skills were assessed when the children were in the spring of first, second and third grades. Word recognition was assessed with the Woodcock Johnson Test of Achievement Revised (1989) in first, second and third grade. Reading comprehension was assessed with the Passage Comprehension task from the Woodcock during the spring of third grade. Also considered were the frequency of reported engagement in activities consistent with either an entertainment approach (reading storybooks, playing rhyming hand clap games, etc.) or a skills approach (completing work books, reviewing flash cards, etc.) when children were in kindergarten and first grade. Zero order correlations revealed significant positive relations between parents' endorsement of an entertainment perspective and children's early literacy and later reading skills. Similarly, there was a significant, positive relation between the frequency of engagement in activities consistent with an entertainment approach and children's subsequent reading development. Multiple regression analyses were conducted on children's early literacy and later reading skills to determine whether any unique variance was predicted by parents' orientation towards literacy and by the type of activities children engaged in. An orientation towards literacy consistent with the notion of literacy as a source of entertainment and engagement in activities consistent with such an orientation were significantly and positively related to both early literacy and later reading development. A skills-based approach to helping children learn to

read was not. Relatedly, Sonnenschein et al. (1997) found that an emphasis on literacy as a source of entertainment for children's appropriation of reading skills facilitated the development of children's early literacy skills, assessed in kindergarten, which in turn fostered word recognition skills in second grade.

Other research on this topic has considered the relation between parental beliefs and children's motivations for reading. The results from the De Baryshe (1995) study, described in the previous section, revealed a positive relation between maternal beliefs and children's interest in reading. She suggested that mothers who have a strong literacy orientation may make the reading interaction more interesting and thus positively affect their children's motivation for reading.

## CONCLUSION

Most research on children's reading development has addressed the type of activity children engage in and the frequency with which the children engage in an activity. The research reviewed in this chapter shows the importance of moving beyond just the type of activity to consider parental beliefs about literacy and the nature of children's engagement with an activity.

Parents' ideas about their children's education need to be considered as an important element in children's school success because the beliefs or ideas that parents have will play a role in the nature of activities they provide at home before the child even enters school. These beliefs also will influence how parents continue to interact with their children once they start school. Research presented in this chapter considered parental beliefs about the importance of education, how children learn and parental involvement in the learning process.

All parents want their children to do well in school. Reading is a key determinant of how well a child will do in school. Despite an almost universal desire for their children's success, there appear to be differences in parental beliefs about how to help their children. Many of the differences are related to differences in sociocultural group.

Perhaps the most interesting beliefs are those focusing on the approach taken by parents to help their children learn to read. Research from different investigators has shown that low income parents are more likely to view literacy as something necessary to learn in order to succeed in school and to use in various daily living functions, including jobs. In contrast, more middle income parents are likely to view literacy as something pleasurable and important for entertainment and learning about one's world. It is unclear from the available literature whether these differences are due to actual cultural differences or instead reflect the parents' different suc-

cesses when they were in school. Income and education are often conflated with many low income parents reporting less education and more limited literacy skills. If one has difficulty reading, it is probably hard to view it as pleasurable or to make it so for one's own children.

Research on parental beliefs about literacy and learning to read suggests a relation between the nature of activities made available to children, affective elements during interactions and children's development. Although there is not yet much available research on the topic, it appears that parents who view literacy as pleasurable tend to provide activities for their children consistent with such an orientation. Children of these parents show higher performance on measures of early literacy and later reading.

It is also important to consider the affective quality of literacy-related interactions. Summarizing over the findings from several studies, it seems that a pleasant interaction increases a child's interest in reading and is related to the frequency with which the child chooses similar activities in the future. More frequent engagement with literacy-relevant activities, in turn, facilitates the child's reading development.

The remainder of this section deals with areas for future research and educational implications of the findings. Inquiry into parental beliefs about children's literacy is a fairly new topic and the research on it is limited. More is needed to confirm findings and broaden the scope of inquiry.

Most of the research has been done with parents of preschoolers and children in early elementary school. What is the nature of parental beliefs as children get older? Do parents' beliefs change as children succeed or struggle in school? Both Lee and Groninger (1994) and Sonnenschein and Schmidt (2000) suggest that the impact of parents' own educational background becomes increasingly important as children progress through school. A parent who struggled in school might feel competent to assist her child when the child was a preschooler but not when the child was in sixth grade.

There is a tendency when reviewing research showing differences in performance across sociocultural groups to assume that within group variability is negligible. Research conducted with low income families (e.g., Neuman et al., 1995; Purcell-Gates et al., 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) shows that there is significant diversity within such groups that needs to be considered in order to understand how children learn to read. Thus, it seems important to understand both between and within group similarities and differences. Although there are some differences in beliefs related to sociocultural group, relations between beliefs, practices and children's development are independent of sociocultural group.

Another topic that needs additional inquiry is the influence of role models on children's learning. As several researchers have suggested, if parents themselves do not read, children may come to view literacy as

something that occurs at school but that is not relevant at home. Additional research is necessary to investigate the accuracy of this notion. If parents serve as important role models of reading for their children, does it matter what type of printed matter the parents read or why they are reading? If children see their parents get enjoyment from reading the newspaper, will that spark children's interest in reading newspapers as well as other types of text? What level of active involvement with literate artifacts is necessary, if any, for children to benefit?

Let us turn now to educational implications of the research presented here. Almost every school teacher tells parents to read with their children. Such recommendations also can be found in the writings of theorists and researchers (e.g., Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). Nevertheless, from the available data on parental beliefs and related practices, it seems certain cautions are in order.

Recommendations from teachers will be followed by parents only if they are consistent with parental beliefs. For example, teachers should be somewhat cautious in recommending storybook reading to parents with more limited literacy skills or less interest in reading. What appears most beneficial about reading storybooks with children is discussion about the meaning of the story, especially if the discussion occurs in a pleasant affective atmosphere. If parents lack time to read or have difficulty reading, this may impact on the quality of the discussion or interaction which in turn will not have the desired effect on the child (Baker et al., 2001). Instead of recommending that parents read storybooks to children, teachers might suggest other forms of text that can be read in addition to or instead of storybooks. For example, Pellegrini, Galda, and Brody (1990) have shown that low income mothers are less likely to talk to their children in a manner consistent with current pedagogical recommendations when reading storybooks than when reading expository text. Alternatively, teachers might make use of volunteers in the community who can read with children when parents are less available (Sonnenschein & Schmidt, 2000). Teachers also can seek out ways to help parents, if they are interested, in improving their own literacy skills.

It is important that teachers dialogue with parents in order to understand what strengths the children come to school with. Teachers need to be sensitive to the beliefs and attitudes of the parents in order to be successful with their children (Auerbach, 1995).

The research in this chapter has addressed home-based influences on children's literacy. It is as important, however, to consider the role of the school in children's learning and to understand relations between parents and teachers. A shared understanding between parents and teachers about what occurs at home and at school seems the foundation of children's school success (Sonnenschein & Schmidt, 2000). Such a shared under-

standing will need to be negotiated between each teacher and parent for each child.

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