

Understanding Children's Early Literacy Development:  
The Nature and Role of Parental Support

by

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## Abstract

The project, “Understanding Children’s Early Literacy Development: The Nature and Role of Parental Support” focused on exploring how parents can support their children’s early literacy development and on examining research on the importance of supporting early literacy development. The literature review also focused on reading theories, critical factors in early literacy acquisition, and ways to support early literacy at home. Critical factors in early literacy acquisition include motivating learning, readiness for learning, non-traditional Western literacy practices, indigenous early literacy, and play. Oral language, reading through shared book reading and environmental print, phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and how the home environment and parental help support literacy are also included. The project concludes with a PowerPoint and script intended for parents and colleagues.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Chapter 1.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Personal Background .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Defining Early Literacy and Early Literacy Support .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>My Research Focus .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Importance of Supporting Early Literacy Development .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Research Questions.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Project Overview.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 2.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Literature Review .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Reading Theories.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Bottom-up Theory of Reading.....	10
Top-Down Theory of Reading .....	11
Interactive Reading Theory.....	13
Transactional Reading Theory.....	14
Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy Learning.....	16
<b>Critical Factors in Early Literacy Acquisition.....</b>	<b>17</b>
Home Support .....	18
Motivating Learning .....	21

Readiness for Learning.....	22
Non-Traditional Western Literacy Practices .....	26
Indigenous Early Literacy .....	28
The Role of Play in Early Literacy Development.....	29
The Adult’s Role in Socio-Dramatic Play .....	35
How to Support Play.....	40
<b>Best Ways to Support Early Literacy Development at Home .....</b>	<b>41</b>
Oral Language.....	41
Reading.....	48
Shared Book Reading .....	49
Environmental Print.....	50
Phonologic Awareness .....	52
Letter Knowledge .....	54
Home Environment and Parental Help Support In-School Literacy .....	55
<b>Summary.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Chapter 3.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Implications for Teaching.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Considerations for Future Research .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>76</b>

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## Chapter 1

### Personal Background

As an educator, student, and parent, I have spent many years developing my understanding of how children learn. I have observed children that learn new concepts with ease and those that struggle to learn. I have witnessed children that actively explore their environment and those that sit still for long periods of time silently observing. I have worked with children of all ages, teaching various subjects including foods, outdoor education, and reading. I have worked within different socioeconomic settings and with different cultures.

I have also observed parents interacting with their children at home and at school. I have worked in schools where parents hover over their children (helicopter parents), hanging up their child's coat and delivering their child's homework in-person to the teacher, in classrooms where parents join in on field trips, and in classrooms where parents never come in the door of the school over the course of the school year. I have observed families that tell oral stories to their children to pass on stories, traditions and values of their culture, families that read books together as part of a daily routine, and families that do not have anything in the house to read.

My inspiration for investigating how parents can support their young children's literacy development evolved over time as I shared space and learning environments with parents, children, administrators, and other educators. At some point I became engaged in finding out the best approaches to learning and to

support learning as I became aware that there are many differing opinions and ideas surrounding the promotion of early literacy. I became curious about what the literature had to say on this topic and whether it agreed or disagreed with what my district, school, and classroom were endorsing. I was also curious to find out whether there is agreement by researchers and government on best practices on this subject.

### **Defining Early Literacy and Early Literacy Support**

For the purposes of this project, children in early literacy refers to children between the ages of three and ten. For the purposes of this project I define literacy as practices that promote listening, talking, reading, or writing. Recent research emphasizes that literacy is something an individual chooses to engage in to construct knowledge, create, communicate, reflect, empathize, critique, and to appreciate (Kennedy, 2013). Meaning-making could be tracing the shapes of letters while making the sound of the letter, writing a shopping list, or listening to a book or an oral story being read. Researchers have demonstrated a link between children's early literacy development and parental support (Strickland, 2004). Early literacy support can be defined as an interaction or activity that takes place both formally or informally with a supportive adult or peer that fosters children's literacy acquisition. It can take place at home, in the car, or at school. Early literacy support often takes place as an informal arrangement between adults and children. It may be an ongoing routine such as reading before bed, or happen in a spontaneous manner such as reading road signs.

## **My Research Focus**

Personally, I want to know what the best practices are in early literacy development and how these practices could be improved to be consistent with the research literature. I want to be able to tell parents about how to help support their children outside of school and to know what resources to recommend. I want to empower parents, to make it easy for them to know what to do for their children and how to do it. As a parent, I would be grateful if someone told me the most effective ways to help support my child in his early literacy development, especially if my child was finding school challenging.

Even before I began researching the literature, I noticed some disagreement about the best way to teach children to learn. In my University education, I studied the various reading theories such as top-down whole language methods and bottom-up phonics methods used with beginning readers.

As a teacher, I wanted to know what to tell parents about how to support their child's early literacy development to correspond with what I was teaching in the classroom. I observed parents enroll their children in commercial literacy programs that had no relationship to the methods and strategies used to develop reading skills in my classroom. Parents invested in expensive games and programs, often those that were not effective, and became discouraged when their child lost interest or when their child continued to struggle. In addition, I observed parents enrolling their children in reading programs that lasted for a short amount of time and after the program ended, the learning was not reinforced at home.

I also observed administrators trying to support parents to help their children. In addition to school programs that served the socioeconomically disadvantaged in the form of meals and supplies, administrators worked with parents to try to support learning by ensuring attendance. I think that some administrators would appreciate knowing research-based ideas for supporting early literacy and share this knowledge with parents.

I believe that if a parent is educated about the research on supporting early literacy and is guided with a few inexpensive tools appropriate to their child's stage of literacy development that can be used at home, children and parents will benefit.

### **The Importance of Supporting Early Literacy Development**

We want to prepare our children to be successful in the world and one of the most important ways to do this is to ensure that they are literate. We want our children to learn to talk and communicate, to be able to understand both the spoken word and the written word, and to be able to communicate with the written word. Ideally, a literate person is a lifelong learner, equipped with skills of communication and understanding and able to engage with the world in a manner that enriches their life and supports them in becoming a self-actualized, empowered, and responsible citizen.

Language is learned before children attend school. Children that are exposed to language before school and have multiple opportunities to observe and experiment with language are at a distinct advantage (Strickland, 2004). Children that are exposed to imaginative play before school are able to develop their cognition and self-regulation and develop their social skills (Bodrova and Leong,

2001). Children that are exposed to reading before entering school develop both an understanding of the structure of a story, development of vocabulary, and an understanding of how both print and a book works (Neumann et al., 2000). All of these literacies help develop a child's cognition and are critical to a child's social and academic success (Heath, 1983; Kennedy, 2013; Baroody & Diamond, 2010).

Moreover, supportive parents that model literacy through engaging with it themselves both for practical considerations and for pleasure deliver an important message that literacy is valued (Weigel & Martin, 2005). Children grow up valuing the artifacts, skills, and space of literacy and are more likely to engage in reading, writing, and communicating outside of school (Weigel & Martin, 2005).

### **Research Questions**

I approach the research literature on my topic with three questions in mind: What are some critical factors in early literacy acquisition; What are the best ways to support a child's early literacy development at home? ; How can the home environment and parental help support in-school literacy?

### **Project Overview**

In Chapter 1 I have discussed my motivations that inspired me to create this project. I have explained the importance of parents supporting their young children's literacy development and the theoretical background of children's cognitive development. In addition to the theoretical foundation in Chapter 2, I review a selection of literature foundational to my project. Topics addressed in the literature review include the importance of play, self-regulation, formal literacy

programs, funds of knowledge, and home literacy practices including reading to young children and the structure of home literacy practices. In Chapter 3, I identify three readings that I found to be the most important and relevant for my colleagues to read and their implications for pedagogy. I outline the PowerPoint presentation that I created for my project and its connection to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. I also discuss the challenges I faced with my review of the literature and suggestions for future research.

My PowerPoint presentation, “Looking at the Literature: How Parents Can Support Their Young Children’s Early Literacy Development” is included in the Appendix, and intended as a summary of what I learned in my project. The PowerPoint workshop consists of 21 slides with an accompanying facilitator script that backs up the slides and containing text that facilitates presentation of the slides. The presentation is important to the growing body of information on supporting early literacy by parents, administrators, and educators as it focuses on relevant tools to support young children’s early literacy.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In this chapter I present the theoretical underpinnings of how young children learn how to talk and read. I discuss the importance of talk and how this can facilitate greater learning. I also discuss how talk leads to reading. I discuss theories about how children learn how to read and discuss other contributing factors including family background. I present a literature review on early literacy in

relation to my questions. I present this in several themes. My first theme is about some of the factors that affect early literacy including early literacy development, readiness for learning, non-traditional Western literacy practices, Indigenous early literacy, and home-school partnerships. I look at the role of play and how this supports early literacy. Next, I examine the development of oral language and reading development and how this affects early literacy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical section of this paper will provide a brief background on how parents supporting their young children's literacy development is rooted in learning theory. I approach the research from a socio-constructivist perspective where society and culture are seen as major factors influencing literacy development. In the socio-constructivist view, learning is constructed in the matrix between social interaction and the interconnections between the individual and the social environment, or as Vygotsky suggested, parents, caregivers and the culture at large share in the responsibility for a child's cognitive development, especially in regards to the development of higher order functions (Vygotsky, 1978).

Much time is spent talking and listening daily to exchange information and ideas. Language is acquired when children interact in social settings with adults and peers (Halliday, 2004; Many, 2002; Massey, 2012). Children learn how to speak to communicate their ideas, understand others, and to get their needs met. Promoting oral language development in a language-rich environment enables children to develop language and early reading skills. Immersion in language-rich environments where children listen to books read aloud and handle books results in learning

about language, reading, and writing (Katims, 1994; Dennis, Lynch, & Stockall, 2012). As they enter school, children identified as early readers share a common history of spending time in environments filled with print and lively interactive conversations (Neumann et al., 2009).

Vygotsky (1978) viewed thinking as a social process. He emphasized, “we learn not only words, but ways of thinking, through our engagement with the people who surround us” (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 197). Furthermore, he believed that some of children’s developmental outcomes and processes thought to occur naturally were directed and influenced by children’s own learning or constructed as an active engagement in their own mental development (Bodrova & Leong, 2001). This theory helps inform parents of the need to socialize their children, encouraging interaction with others as a way of learning and to broaden their thinking. Vygotsky postulated the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the theory that “what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 211). In other words, when adults or a more advanced peers support the child to understand and develop oral language through the acquisition of more complex vocabulary, the child will be more likely to be able to use this new vocabulary independently on subsequent tries. This zone is identified as a range that is neither too difficult nor too easy so that the child does not become frustrated or bored and give up. Young children’s oral language development, while spending time in make believe play, is an area that Vygotsky felt that adults could assist, thereby contributing to a young child’s cognitive development.

Further, Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti (2005) found that family contributions or “Funds of Knowledge” added to the child’s learning about the world. Children bring their culture, background, beliefs, and family knowledge to learning. Parents contribute to their child’s learning, drawing from their cultural backgrounds, life experience, and special skills. Unfortunately, minority groups may not communicate with teachers and administrators due to lack of language skills and cultural assumptions both by parents and educators. “Learning to value the funds of knowledge of all parents can improve home-school relationships” (Whitmore & Meier, 2008, p. 450).

Another important theory was developed by Louise Rosenblatt. She examined the relationship between the reader and writer. According to Rosenblatt, meaning is created in the transaction between the reader and the text and this transaction creates something new in the reading, independent and different from the contributions from the reading (Pearson, 2009). Smagorinsky (2013) considered Rosenblatt’s theory of reader response and merged this with Vygotsky’s activity theories and came up with what he named a “cultural model of reading”. He believed that meaning resided in the transactional zone, “in which reader, text, and context meet and become something more than their sums or products” (p. 21). In other words, readers create their own texts as they respond to books. Supportive adults can help guide children by modeling and scaffolding the learning through conversation and activities to support this “transaction”.

Included in this transaction of reading is the reader’s background. Tracey and Morrow (2012), wrote about the importance of Schema theory and its’ relationship

to learning new information. Schemata is defined as the background that a person accesses from their experiences. Tracey and Morrow (2012) highlighted that the more developed a person's background is on any topic, the more easily that person will be able to learn new information on that topic.

### **Reading Theories**

Educators have an extensive choice of methods and techniques for teaching reading. Discerning best practices in how to teach reading can be challenging. An understanding of the four prominent reading theories provides a historical understanding of reading research and practice and a practical foundation for teaching reading.

### **Bottom-up Theory of Reading**

The traditional bottom-up approach to reading was popularized in the 1950's by behavioral psychologists who held that the prevalent look-say method of reading popular at the time caused reading difficulties for many students. According to Gough (1972) reading occurs by translating writing into letters, which are then translated into speech sounds, which are then pieced together as single words. Finally, words are put together thus giving the reader the message. Teachers of bottom-up reading teach subskills first, often by teaching the names of letters, then sounds of letters, gradually working towards whole words and then whole texts. This model views information flow in a series of independent stages that transform the input and passes it on to the next stage without any feedback (Stanovich, 1980).

Language is seen as a way of transforming letters into sounds to be interpreted by the reader as a passive recipient of information from the text.

Phonics is an example of a bottom-up method of reading. In phonics, children are taught how to decode words by learning the sounds of the letters and then piecing the sounds together into individual words. Words are pieced together to enable the reader to arrive at the author's written message (Gough, 1972). Rules of decoding such as using digraphs, blends, and rules of spelling are taught. According to Gough and Cosky (1977), readers are taught to process letters and words in a systematic and complete fashion.

This model of reading is seen as insufficient as although decoding is explained, reading is more than sounding out words. Although it is useful to have a knowledge of letter-sound relationships, lexical or word knowledge, and syntactic or contextual understanding, reading is composed of more than these parts. In addition to learning the surface structure or sensory structure of the texts, students need to be active participants by bringing their background experiences to the text.

### **Top-Down Theory of Reading**

To compensate the behaviorists "drill and kill" concept of reading instruction through bottom-up methods, researchers became interested in understanding the thinking behind the behavior of reading (Alexander, 2006). Behaviorism took a back seat to new cognitive theory representing the mind's innate capacity for learning. Two research communities: linguists and psycholinguists influenced this reading theory. The linguists, some of which followed in the tradition of Chomsky (1957, 2002), theorized reading achievement followed an innate ability for language and

was influenced by environmental factors, including instruction. The psycholinguists viewed the interaction between reader and text as a natural communicative power.

Learning to read as in learning to speak was viewed as a natural process given enough exposure with meaningful contexts (Goodman & Goodman, 1979). Reading is not just extracting meaning from a text but a process of connecting information in the text with the knowledge the reader brings to the act of reading. A dialogue takes place between the reader and the text while using their cognitive processes in which the reader's background knowledge plays a key role in the creation of meaning. Reading is an active, purposeful activity, dependent on prior knowledge and expectations of the reader. Less emphasis is placed on decoding and word recognition and more emphasis is placed on pre-reading activities to develop the readers' knowledge of the topic (Stanovich, 2010). Captivating, relevant texts were the focus of this period (Alexander & Fox, 2008).

The interest in understanding what the reader brings to the reading equation was explored in schema theory and had a major impact on top-down and other reading instruction. It describes in detail how the background knowledge of the learner interacts with the reading task and illustrates how a student's knowledge and previous experience with the world is crucial to deciphering a text. According to Gunning (2010), people compartmentalize everything they know into schemata, or knowledge structures and individualize this knowledge. The more elaborated one's schema is on a particular topic, the easier it is to learn new information on that topic. Reading instruction has been influenced by this theory by highlighting the role

of existing knowledge (what the student brings to the text) in acquiring new knowledge (Cobb and Kallus, 2010).

The top-down approach serves fluent readers who read easily but not those still struggling to decode individual words. In addition, a reader with no background of the topic (schemata) will struggle to interact with the text and classmates and to predict possible outcomes in a story. Building and activating student background prior to reading texts with students will help build background knowledge.

### **Interactive Reading Theory**

The interactive theory developed in the 1970's in recognition of both the importance of the text and the reader in the reading process. The interactive theory brings together top-down and bottom-up reading theories simultaneously in the reading process. In this non-linear process the reader may be influenced, defined, or shaped by the text in a social and cultural context or be influenced in their response to texts. Reading was viewed as an interaction between the reader and the text and valued what the reader brought to the writing on the page (Rumelhart, 1978, Stanovich, 1980). Students were recognized as individuals, possessing different strengths and weaknesses and making connections in different ways, and having the ability to compensate for reading difficulties with other cognitive strengths (Stanovich, 1980).

Instruction emphasized teaching students how to be efficient and effective text processors through the use of strategies including summarization, mapping, self-questioning, and predicting (Alexander and Fox, 2008). Lower level processes (such as decoding a word) and higher-level processes (such as inferring the author's

intent) interacted with each other. In addition, reading was viewed as purposeful, sometimes a social interaction (class book clubs), utilizing prior knowledge of the reader. Needed strategies are taught through scaffolding to support students to become independent readers.

The interactive reading theory was criticized by those who had more naturalistic and holistic views of reading as being an information processing approach (Alexander & Fox 2008). Louise Rosenblatt voiced her concerns that this method neglected the aesthetic of reading, focusing instead on information-getting or fact-finding (1978/1994).

### **Transactional Reading Theory**

Another reading theory to be discussed is the transactional reading theory. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory emphasized the social nature of learning as meaning is created in the transaction between the reader and the text. Her theory incorporated ideas from John Dewey and Vygotsky and emphasized how individual social and cultural factors influence readers' responses and interpretations of the text. The writings of Vygotsky (1962/1986), Lave (1988), Heath (1983), Rogoff (1990) and others promoted a more natural, holistic view of reading (Alexander & Fox, 2008). Skill-oriented basal readers of the 1970's and comprehension-oriented basal readers of the 1980's were replaced by literature-based texts where readers' response trumped comprehension (Pearson, 2009). The "transactive model" replaced the "interactive model" as the field moved from efferent (primarily reading to gain information) to aesthetic (the purpose of the reading is experiencing the text and the literary world created by the author) response to literature (Rosenblatt,

1978).

According to Rosenblatt, the exchange that takes place during reading is best described by the term transaction, “to emphasize that the meaning is being built up through the back-and-forth relationship between reader and text during a reading event” (1999). A reader internalizes, and draws on a social context and a socially produced language from their family and society that creates a particular social and cultural environment making each “transaction” a unique reading event (Rosenblatt, 1999). The relationship between the reader and the text is a back-and-forth process, the reader drawing upon personal experiences as they transact with the text.

Smagorinsky (2001) developed Rosenblatt’s (1978) reader response theory along with Vygotsky’s activity theories (Wertsch, 1993) and came up with his cultural model of reading. He postulated that the meaning in understanding from Rosenblatt’s transactional zone of reading, resides in this zone in which the reader, text, and context meet and become something more than their sums or products (Smagorinsky, 2001). In other words, readers compose their own texts as a response to their reading while reading, evoked from previous texts and experiences and shaping the type and manner of their interpretations (Pearson, 2009).

In this era of transactional learning, the process of learning rather than the products of learning mattered most. High quality literature replaced basal readers and book clubs that emphasized the aesthetic experience were formed. The emphasis was placed on the actual experience and the transactional approach provided the basis for a focus on both direct and indirect, tacit effects (Rosenblatt,

1999).

### **Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy Learning**

The last reading theory to be considered encourages a broader perspective of learning from that of the individual child and knowledge to children as inseparable from their social contexts and knowledge and meaning as embedded within sociocultural practices. A more holistic perspective views children's learning as occurring through their involvement in literacy activities and practices that happen in their social environment. Learning is thought to occur through interaction, negotiation, and collaboration and considers the influence of parental input, cultural, historical, and the child's imaginative world (Lanter, 2006). Sociocultural theory supports Vygotsky's theory of learning as a social process (1978).

Understanding the ways that people use literacy in their everyday lives and finding ways to ensure that literacy instruction is meaningful and relevant by recognizing and incorporating children's out-of-school ways of practicing literacy helps promote learning. Decreasing literacy gaps for students whose families and communities practice literacy in ways that may differ from those in the mainstream or positions of power benefits more learners. Sociocultural theory focuses on the effect of instruction, how learning takes place, and the impact of adults and peers on the learning process as well as their social and cultural capital (Perry, 2012).

### **Critical Factors in Early Literacy Acquisition**

Literacy begins at birth and is a developmental process that continues throughout one's life. Everything that adults do to support young children's

language and literacy counts in the development of literacy (Hart & Risley, 1995). Literacy skills are often accurate forecasters of employability and are connected to income (Murnane & Levy, 2004 as cited in Snow, 2004). Literacy has the power to change lives, even for those learning to read later in life after growing up unable to read.

In their first years of life, children are exposed to literacy skills and behaviors that influence language and literacy outcomes in later years continuing on until they enter school. As Schickedanz (1986) suggests, the more formal learning environment at school should be an extension of the learning of literacy that begins at home. Although formal teaching of conventional literacy skills does not begin until children enter kindergarten and first grade, the infant, toddler and preschool years are viewed as the place where “children take their first critical steps toward learning to read and write” (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 32). Another term to define this early literacy is “emergent literacy”. Bennet, Weigel & Martin (2002) define emergent literacy as the literacy skills that young children develop before formal schooling. Of paramount importance is the understanding that emergent literacy is a process- one that continues and grows over time. Children need to make sense of their world, to explore their natural curiosities, and to communicate.

Research from the late 1980’s looked at the home and examined specific activities and resultant skills and knowledge about literacy taking place in this environment. Van Kleeck and Schuele (2010) conclude from this body of work that as children interact with print in the informal setting of home, as they watch adults

interact with print, in the context of sharing books with adults and in explorations with their own writing, children become aware that print is meaningful and useful. This attitude and belief lays the foundation in children's transition to reading and writing. According to van Kleek and Shuele (2010), long before they possess conventional literacy skills, children involve themselves with acts of literacy in their independent and guided play and in other activities related to literacy. Similar recommendations for parents at home and teachers at preschools advise activities that extend far beyond shared reading (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000).

### **Home Support**

“Research has shown the importance of home support in early childhood learning and development” (Yuen, 2011, p. 147). An article by Strickland (2004), talks about the role of literacy in early childhood education. Strickland reminds us that in young children, oral language and literacy develop together and, that, “children learn from listening and talking and this contributes to their ability to read and write and vice versa” (2004, p. 86). Yuen's (2011) recent case study of parents, teachers and children in China supports this claim. She examined a school-based initiative to engage parents in supporting their children's learning. Part of the evaluation included examining parents' and teachers' evaluation of the project. Six teachers and sixty families read daily newsletters written and illustrated by their Kindergarten children to communicate with their parents. Data collection included interviews, records of observations, and minutes of meetings. An analysis of the data showed that parents agreed that the project enhanced their understanding of children' learning and that daily communication with their children improved their

parent-child interaction. Teachers believed the project would affect the children's growth as thinkers and communicators. Children were motivated to learn and express their ideas. The researcher concluded that writing and illustrating promoted children's literacy development, learning motivation, parent-child communication, and home-school collaboration. She also concluded the growing need to empower parents to support the education of young children. Blasi and Hill-Clark agreed with Yuen's conclusion, stating that, "Educators can help families of young children improve their awareness and knowledge of optimal literacy development" (2005, p. 46).

Even when parents are not considered aware of optimal literacy development, "Research supports the conclusion that considerable language and literacy related development occurs before formal reading instruction" (Wiegel & Martin, 2005). Families and child care play an important role in the development of literacy and the literacy and language skills developed during the preschool years are among some of the strongest predictors of school success (Werner & Smith, 1992). A study by Weigel and Martin (2005) compared the influences of home and child-care literacy environments with preschool-age children's literacy and language development. Interviews and standardized assessment data was collected from 85 preschool-age children, their parents, and their child-care teachers. Print knowledge, language skills, expressive and receptive language were measured. Findings from correlation and hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed that children's print knowledge was consistently associated with parents and teachers personal reading and writing habits, language activities conducted with

children, and parental and teacher belief. In addition, children's literacy and language skills benefit when parents and teachers value their role in supporting those skills. These results also imply that to enhance literacy and language outcomes for preschool age children, both home and preschool environments need to be strengthened. Unfortunately this study examined a limited number of literacy skills from middle-class participants and relied on self-reported data from parents and teachers, which may suggest that parents misinterpreted the questions asked. Parents and educators literacy habits, activities and beliefs play a big role in the development of preschoolers' language and literacy development. The many contexts of which children take part in literacy activities at home and in preschools influences their literacy development. As Dickinson and Tabors (1991) affirmed, "the contributions of both homes and schools must be taken into account when one is examining the roots of literacy".

A case study by Neumann, Hood & Neumann (2009), provides an interesting and intentional way to develop literacy in young children by the use of scaffolding emergent writing and letter knowledge at home while using environmental print. The two and a half-year old son of two of the researchers was taught emergent literacy skills through scaffolding prior to school entry. Environmental print was used to learn to learn how to read and write in a multi-sensory approach. Data collection included notes, recording, writing samples, and dialog samples. An analysis of the data suggested that the scaffolding approach, incorporating environmental print, and using a multisensory approach, is a promising approach for supporting early literacy skills, particularly emergent writing skills, alphabet

knowledge, and print motivation. The credibility of two parents studying their son is questionable. A controlled, randomized trial of this approach, with standardized quantitative measures is needed to determine the benefits of the approach for scaffolding young children's literacy.

### **Motivating Learning**

Early literacy learning can be incidental or intentional. Taking advantage of children's individual interests to help motivate learning is one approach to maximize learning. In addition, Farver et al.'s (2006) study included the finding that children's report of literacy interest mediates the relation between parents' involvement in literacy related activities. Baroody and Diamond (2010) examined associations among children's self-reported literacy interest, their parents' report of their home literacy environment, and their code-related skills. 81 four and five-year-old preschoolers at risk for reading difficulties and enrolled in Head Start programs or local child care centers in a small Midwestern town in the United States and their parents were studied. Data included parent questionnaires focused on family characteristics and home learning environments, three assessments of children's literacy skills: alphabet knowledge, letter-word knowledge, and receptive language, and children's interest in literacy activities was measured. An analysis of the data reported two major themes. Children who reported a higher interest in literacy activities also had more knowledge of code-related skills including the alphabet and children who reported higher levels of interest in literacy activities were more likely to know ten or more letters of the alphabet. Children with age-level receptive language scores had slightly higher parent reported-home literacy environment

activity and child-reported interest. Evidence that children's interest in literacy-related activities is related to learning code-related emergent literacy skills is provided by this study. In addition, children who know more letters and perform better on tasks related to letters and words are more highly interested in literacy activities. Previous studies demonstrate that letter knowledge is a good predictor of children's reading development (Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994). Although this study only used one measure of language and a small sample size, further studies of children's interest in literacy-related activities related to emergent literacy outcomes is indicated to better understand the role of interest to outcomes.

### **Readiness for Learning**

Although the idea of being ready to learn or "readiness for school" is controversial because many believe that schools should be ready to adapt to their students needs, not the other way round, the literature primarily takes up the perspective of getting the child ready for formal learning. School readiness usually refers to children's social and cognitive preparedness for formal schooling. According to a national survey of kindergarten teachers in the United States, fifty percent of children entering school exhibit a lack of academic or social skills needed for success (Skibbe et al, 2011; Farver et al, 2006).

Researchers view socio emotional skills including self-regulation, as skills first developed in the home environment (Farver et al., 2006). Blair and Razza (2007) define self-regulation in children as the "developmental integration of emotion and cognition in early childhood" (p. 697). There are two kinds of self-regulation, cognitive and social-emotional. According to Leong and Bodrova (2003),

planning ahead, reflection, and controlling one's behavior is cognitive and delaying gratification and following the rules without reminders are examples of socio-emotional self-regulation.

A plethora of studies have investigated readiness for school-based learning. Skibbe et al. (2011) examined the influence of schooling during children's first and second years of preschool in relationship to chronological age. Seventy-six four year-old children were tested in the fall and spring using measures of self-regulation, decoding, letter knowledge and vocabulary. Data was analyzed using a hierarchical linear model and the study concluded that preschool is not associated with children's development of self-regulation in either year. Decoding and letter knowledge was positively affected by two years of preschool. Children's chronological age, not one to two years of preschool predicted vocabulary and self-regulation outcomes. Development of vocabulary was attributed to play experiences, not direct instruction. The validity of this study would be increased if it included a diverse sample of participants from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall results indicate that more preschool is better than less as children demonstrated significant gains in vocabulary skills in both years. Another study within this age group looked at various aspects of self-regulation. The objective was to explore variations in the home environment of low-income Latino families with regard to two school readiness skills: children's oral language, and social functioning. 122 low socioeconomic status Latino mothers completed questionnaires about their family demography, home environment, and their perceived parenting stress. Preschool teachers rated the children's social

functioning and children's receptive vocabulary was tested. Data was collected at the beginning of the preschool year. Results demonstrated that children's interest in literacy promoted their oral language and social functioning. Perceived parenting stress was directly associated with oral language and social functioning scores. The use of self-administered questionnaires to assess the home environment is always subject to bias. Studies that included families with a higher socioeconomic status would inform us as to whether these results are true across different socioeconomic levels. In addition, other related aspects of early language development would provide more information of children's potential. Not only are social and relational skills among the best primary prerequisites for school readiness, they are also the best predictors of children's academic and social functioning at school entry (Farver et al., 2006). In addition, if the affective environment of the home is positive and children and parents enjoy shared reading activities, school readiness skills are enhanced (Britto, 2001).

Social skills are an important part of school readiness. Some researchers advocate that readiness for kindergarten includes social task mastery specific to kindergarten. Examining skills that children are likely to encounter in kindergarten can help prepare children for success in school (Ladd, 2006). Efforts by parents to support preschoolers in activities with their peers and other social activities are important preparatory activities. Many kindergarten teachers prioritize social and emotional development over academic development and view socially and emotionally mature children as learning more quickly in the classroom (Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

The connection between self-regulation and letter knowledge is interesting. Blair and Razza (2007) studied the role of self-regulation in emerging academic ability in one hundred and forty-one 3-5-year-old children from low-income homes. Effortful control, false belief understanding, and executive function were measured and compared to math and literacy ability in kindergarten. False belief understanding is the awareness that some beliefs are false and is associated with higher levels of behavioral regulation in preschoolers (Blair & Razza, 2007). In two, 45-minute sessions, children's receptive vocabulary, executive function, false belief understanding, and attention shifting were measured. Questionnaires completed by parents and teachers examined child temperament and teachers reported on child behavior in the classroom. Results indicated various aspects of self-regulation accounted for unique variance in academic outcomes- independent of general intelligence. The inhibitory control aspect of executive function related to both early math and reading ability. Blair and Razza also observed that "children who have not yet attained a developmentally expected knowledge of the letters of the alphabet are characterized by general problems with self-regulation (2007, p. 659). As letter recognition is a valuable indicator of reading ability, it is likely that those children with problems in reading are associated with general problems in self-regulation (Blair and Razza, 2007). Whether effortful control should be considered as temperament or an aspect of behavior unique to the classroom could be a direction for future research.

In a related study, behavioral regulation predicted emergent literacy, vocabulary and math skills. McClelland et al. (2007) examined whether performance

and growth on a measure of behavioral regulation, had a positive effect on literacy, vocabulary, and math during prekindergarten. Three and four-year-old children from 45 diverse ranging socioeconomic status schools took part in the study. Children's emergent literacy, vocabulary, math, and behavior, as measured using the Head-to Toes Task, were tested in the fall and spring. Parents completed questionnaires pertaining to family background. Results demonstrated that behavioral regulation positively and meaningfully affected emergent literacy, vocabulary, and math skills during the prekindergarten year. Future studies of specific mechanisms to effective intervention should be studied. Parents and teachers can accommodate children's individual characteristics, family background, and sociocultural factors in the promotion of behavioral regulation to support school readiness.

### **Non-Traditional Western Literacy Practices**

In addition to Yuen (2011) and Neuman, Hood & Neuman's (2009) case studies' suggestions of specific methods to foster early literacy, are developmental concerns for those children who come from non-dominant cultural backgrounds. As Purcell-Gates (2011) comments in Hare, "...children familiar with the knowledge and skills associated with the dominant literacy practices of schooling tend to have an advantage" (p. 390). A recent study by Hare examined the contributions of Indigenous knowledge to young indigenous children's literacy learning (2011). Parents, extended family, caregivers, and community stakeholders from five Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve or AHSOR (an Aboriginal early childhood intervention program modeled on Head Start) members from western Canada

visited five AHSOR sites, two in remote locations and three next to small urban centers. Data collection included interviews, focus/discussion groups, observation of program settings, field notes, and attendance at community events. An analysis of the data resulted in concluding that First Nations families engaged in greater literacy practices than was initially recognized by AHSOR workers, and that although some Aboriginal families value early literacy learning, they described a broader range of literacy activities that they participated in. The findings included identification of cultural practices that children participated in. Hare concluded that, “educators who work with Indigenous children need to create space for Indigenous knowledge so as to support Indigenous children and families” (p 408). Echoing these sentiments is Guevremont and Kohen’s (2012) study of the relationship of Aboriginal language instruction and school outcomes. This study used data from the child and adult components of the 2001 Canadian Aboriginal People’s survey to examine factors related to speaking an Aboriginal language and how speaking an Aboriginal language is related to school outcomes. Data collection included components of the 2001 survey, and interviews. Results demonstrated that children living on reserve and learning Aboriginal language at home and at school have better outcomes than children not learning an Aboriginal language. Children living off reserve and speaking an Aboriginal language but not taught at school were less likely to look forward to going to school as were the on reserve native language speakers. As Hare said, “For Indigenous children, the need to bridge Indigenous family and community cultural and linguistic experiences with school-based literacy

expectations and practices is critical to improving their educational outcomes and future success and well-being” (p. 391).

### **Indigenous Early Literacy**

Like Hare, Guevremont and Kohen, Mui and Anderson’s case study of an Indo-Canadian six-year old girl and her extended family, challenges Western schooling practices with different cultural and non- traditional practices (2008). The participant lived with her extended family, consisting of 15 members, and including seven school- age children, and nannies from the Philippines. The study described the literacy studies she engaged in with support of her extended family. Data collection included field notes, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, photographs, and sample literacy activities and artifacts. Data analysis consisted of transcribed interviews, divided into idea units and coded in categories. Results showed that although the household did not engage in storybook reading, theirs was a literacy-rich environment including family members other than parents supporting early literacy by reading, discussing and playing with the children. Findings include the important roles other family members play in supporting early literacy, and that as an additive bilingual child, using one’s first language to learn another language is facilitative. Researchers concluded that, “As teachers work with increasing numbers of children and families from different cultural groups, it is essential that they recognize and value the different ways that literacy is supported in homes and communities” (p. 234). Further research needs to be carried out on the role of using one’s primary language to support learning a second one at the primary level.

## **The Role of Play in Early Literacy Development**

Play can be defined as a way of engaging with enjoyable activities. Play takes on different meaning according different researchers. Wohlwend (2013) defines play “as a social and semiotic practice that facilitates pivots to imagined contexts by recontextualizing classroom reality and maintaining a ‘not-real’ time frame”. Vygotsky viewed play as an internal motivator that propels child development onward. He studied the “make-believe play” or dramatic play found in children in the primary years. He viewed this play as having three parts: children create an imaginary situation, they take on and act out roles, and they follow rules that align with specific roles (Bodrova, 2008).

Children have always played in every culture and around the globe. Fifty years ago children played with others in their communities and neighborhoods, with children of different ages, with little or no supervision, for long periods of time. Older children modeled and scaffolded roles and rules that governed the play. Studies comparing self-regulation levels and the ability to follow directions in play from the 1940’s to today has led researchers to conclude that the ability of children to self-regulate has declined as a result of less time for play and a lower quality of play in preschool and kindergarten (Bodrova, 2008). An increase in adult-directed forms of recreation and learning, safety concerns, lack of toys that promote imagination, and a lack of adult mediation of play are contributing factors that impact today’s play (Bodrova, 2008).

Even though the quality of play has decreased, children still devote a lot of time and energy to play. To those who spend time with young children, it is obvious

that much is being learned while playing. Play is recognized for its ability to mediate social, cognitive, and language development in early childhood (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011).

As educational psychologist Susan Isaacs stated in the 1920's, "Play is the work of children". Young children are naturally drawn to play and play is an essential way that children develop. Barnett et al. (2008) wrote about success in preschool and how young children develop success when they are actively engaged and supported in their learning. Children are natural agents of their own learning and strive to make meaning in their world. Sociocultural perspectives posit that play is the child's attempt to make sense of their world and of the cultural worlds that children grow up in (Wohlwend, 2013).

In addition to making sense of their world, play has other benefits including cognitive development. Among the first to link play with cognitive development were Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978). Piaget viewed play in young children as an independent activity utilized to consolidate mental processes children already possessed whereas Vygotsky viewed play as being a motivating force that drove the development of cognitive functions in children (Korat, Bahar, & Snapir, 2002). Play in the early years has been linked to development of verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy, and group participation. In addition, play has been linked to readiness for school, and children's ability to master literacy and numeracy (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

Researchers have found that developmentally appropriate curriculum that includes play improves the social and academic success of young children (Barnett et al., 2008). Researchers agree that a perspective that only looks at and values cognitive skills is not enough to ensure development in literacy, that affective factors also contribute to literacy development (Kennedy, 2013). Creating authentic play environments, which mirror real-life situations promote an increase in literacy acts, increasing complexity in play, and increased mastery of language routines used in the setting (Kennedy, 2013). Vygotsky believed that the quality of preschool and kindergarten children's play was a better forecaster of later scholastic abilities than their mastery of academic skills at that age (Bodrova, 2008).

Several components of play promote intellectual development according to Vygotsky's model. Play develops new forms of thinking through role-playing in imaginary contexts. These new forms of thinking can drive abstract thinking through external and internal actions. Play develops self-regulation by children following rules when playing a role and by the need to suppress immediate impulses and stay in-role. Make believe play promotes early literacy through oral language use, development of metalinguistic awareness, and the development of imagination. In addition, play promotes early literacy development through authentic purposes of reading and writing (Bodrova, 2008).

To promote the use of play as a tool for cognitive development, the Tools of the Mind project was developed by Bodrova and Leong (2001). The purpose of the project was to improve children's ability to learn and to teach educators new techniques for working with children by using crafted activities. Using a Vygotskian

approach, these strategies included scaffolding early literacy skills and instruction of teachers in the “zones of proximal development”. Included were “play plans” where children and teachers discussed and recorded how the day’s play time was to be organized and what roles were going to be used. Play was viewed as the activity most conducive to development in young children. The project developed a computer based assessment tool that targeted skills and concepts most critical for early literacy along with the development of meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic skills based on Vygotskian principles. The Early Literacy Advisor (ELA) used game-like formats and activities similar to those experienced in school. These were recorded by adults and scanned into a computer to generate individual profiles. The study utilized the assistance of ten kindergarten teachers and their classes (five experimental and five control) with 426 children participating. The project consisted of teachers implementing scaffolded writing, written learning plans, and sound analysis. These teachers were supported by staff to help implement techniques and gather writing samples. Children were assessed twice in the school year. Assessment data was analyzed using S-Plus statistical software, as was accuracy scores and multiple scales to analyze writing samples and reading concept tests. Results showed higher levels of achievement and faster rates of progress for the children in the experimental group than for the students in the control classrooms. Significant growth was recorded in several pre-literacy variables closely associated with reading achievement in later grades. Statistically significant increases included improvement in sound-to-sound correspondence, letter recognition, comprehension of pattern in a text, understanding of the symbolic

function of a printed word, and separation of a printed word into its component letters (p. 36). After the study had been completed, teachers of students from the study in grade one and grade two classrooms noticed that these students were usually more self-regulated learners, expressed more interest in writing than their peers, and had higher reading and writing levels than their peers. The Tools of the Mind group participated in two daily sessions in which scaffolded writing, written learning plans, and sound analysis were used. Scaffolded writing and play plans were implemented together and took place for ten minutes daily. The control group practiced writing, looked at books or read a story as part of a literacy period. Both groups attended a computerized phonics program. A comparison of the curriculum from both the experimental and the control classrooms, teacher training of both groups, and background of the participants would help develop the study. Further research as to the long-term effects of using the Tools of the Mind project by interviewing and retesting the study's subjects would be beneficial.

Concepts raised in Bodrova and Leong's study are also reflected in Barnett, Jung, Yarosz, Thomas, Hornbeck, Stechuk, and Burns (2008) study of their randomized trial on the educational effects of the Tools of the Mind curriculum. A more rigorous test of the educational effectiveness of Tools of the Mind independent of curriculum developers in a randomized trial was used to compare Tools to the standard practice in an urban school district with district-developed curriculum. Three preschool teachers and 106 three and four-year old children participated in this study alongside seven teachers and 168 children in the control group. Teachers in the Tools group were trained to deliver the Tools of the Mind curriculum and

visited weekly to ensure that they were able to deliver the Tools curriculum correctly. Data was collected by assessment in the fall and spring in math, letter-word identification, vocabulary, oral language, and through a social skills rating system. Classroom observation data and child assessment data was analyzed and resulted in the conclusion that The Tools of the Mind Curriculum improved classroom experiences, social development and cognitive development. Statistically significant differences between the project and non-project classroom in the area of writing included an increase in the number of words that children wrote previous to testing, increasing complexity of children's written messages, more consistency in the use of writing conventions, more accurate spelling, and better phonemic encoding of words. In the area of pre-reading, improvement was noted in sound-to-symbol correspondence, voice to print match, greater understanding of the concept of a sentence, and understanding of the symbolic function of printed words (p.34). A subsequent study of the same program by these researchers with fewer participants produced positive effects on multiple objective measures of executive function related to self-regulation Findings suggest that curriculum, at a developmentally appropriate level and highlighting play, promotes above grade level learning and development as well as social self-regulation and cognitive success. The use of a problem behavior scale to measure classroom quality and executive functions is questionable as positive behaviors are not examined. Future research is recommended that compares the Tools of the Mind curriculum to similar and different curriculums to see if they produce comparable and different self-regulation results.

These two studies examined Tools of the Mind projects and curriculum and arrived at similar conclusions. Both studies utilized scaffolding, “how and to what extent play should be guided”- one of the most hotly debated questions in teacher circles (Barnett et al. 2008, p. 300). Although Bodrova and Leong (2001) utilized scaffolding in supporting writing and Barnett et al. (2008) used scaffolding to support and challenge learning, these studies used different methodologies to carry this out. Examples of what a teacher’s specific role might look like are examined in the following two studies. In this next study, the role of the teacher in socio-dramatic play is examined to determine how to support early literacy through play in kindergarten. The study focused on the nature of support, which one teacher provided.

### **The Adult’s Role in Socio-Dramatic Play**

Korat, Snapir, & Barat’s (2002) study of the teacher’s role in socio-dramatic play was grounded in an emergent literacy point of view on the acquisition of written language combined with Vygotsky’s concept of the “zone of proximal development”. A basic tenet of the researchers was the belief that literacy does not emerge from a vacuum. Children constantly interact with peers, siblings, and adults, who provide contexts and opportunities for literacy engagement. The study took place in Tel-Aviv, Israel, in a middle class kindergarten class with 32 children, ages five-and-a-half to six-and-a-half and with one experienced kindergarten teacher. The project took place for six months. Data was collected through observations, field notes, still pictures, and children’s samples of emergent writing. Two socio-dramatic activities were shared as being typical of teacher participation in children’s literacy

play in the project. Teacher mediation was viewed as necessary as “the emergence of literacy demands intervention but that such intervention needs to be introduced in a very sensitive way” (Korat, Bahar & Snapir, p. 387). Two levels of intervention were utilized in this project. At the first level this consisted of easy to access rich environments of print, at the second level, the teacher responded willingly to questions about written language such as how to represent information in a note and posed questions aimed at the child’s zone of proximal development such as helping the children become aware of the functional level of written communication by writing a note. In these two activities, the teacher engaged with the students only when needed, her questions brought focus to the children’s communication, and she gave them guidance without taking away their control. The teacher elaborated the children’s language, asked many questions, and modeled high-level thought processes. She also scaffolded, challenged, and supported self-regulation of the activities.

Recommendations from this study propose supporting oral and written language in the context of play by sensitive and supportive educators. This study recorded important anecdotal analysis of literacy play with teacher participation. Although the researchers focused on only two “typical” activities, they provided a model of supported and developmentally appropriate play-based literacy for the consideration of future kindergarten teachers. Further research needs to be conducted to find out if adult intervention supports children’s literacy development during socio-dramatic activities.

Another related study further demonstrates the concept of supporting dramatic play with sensitive, supportive teachers. Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot's (2011) study of classroom interactions between eight preschool teachers and 32 students tested a model of teacher-child play interactions influenced by Vygotsky and other Vygotskian researchers. The fundamental question to be answered concerned how much guidance children needed in their play. Data collection included videotaping of teachers as they interacted with children during free play periods in the classroom (play that was self-guided and intrinsically motivated). Teachers were interviewed to confirm and elucidate findings from the recorded interactions, field notes gathered, general observation of classroom activities and routines made, and documents examined. Distinct types of play support given by teachers were identified and helped create a coding system. Goodness-of-fit between teacher responses and children's needs were identified. Identified types of support were sorted into three distinct categories determined by the need of adult guidance by the child: much need, some need, no need. A child was identified with 'much need' if for example, they were unable or unwilling to engage with play independently or with others or were unable to proceed without harming others or themselves without adult intervention. A child was identified with 'some need' if they could benefit from adult involvement to help them sustain their engagement and benefit their activity as in maintaining positive interactions with their peers. A child was identified as having 'no need' of adult play support when they were able to play independently or with peers safely and would not benefit in a specific way from adult support. Results demonstrated that the teachers generally responded to the

students with an appropriate amount of interaction and support. Teacher behaviors were identified as direct interaction, indirect interaction, observation, and no interaction as a response to the children's play needs. The student's independent play was more often the result of good-fit-interactions than poor-fit-interactions. A good fit is identified as the child receiving just the support needed and allowing the teacher to gradually withdraw support and the child to continue with autonomous play. This is similar to Vygotsky's gradual release of responsibility model where the student is scaffolded or supported until they no longer need the support and achieve the ability to act independently (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, cognitive development is supported by earlier independent play in which children self-monitor their own thinking and behavior, reflect on, and carry out their own plan (p. 214). A critique of this study concerns the variable of gender. As all of the teachers in this study were female and the sex of the children was undisclosed, was this a factor in the determination of the fit? Would the results have been the same in this class if the teachers that were male?

Even though children have always played, some would say play is undergoing a transition. The addition of interactive screens are changing play and literacies. Children spend more time playing in virtual worlds and less time playing with other children in person. In addition, consumer culture permeates children's play as they consume and produce their own meanings (Wohlwend, 2013). According to a Vygotskian cultural-historical view, factors that have changed the quality and quantity of play include parental influence, less time for play, and lack of adult mediation (Bodrova, 2008). Today's society has less unstructured time where

children can play by themselves without adults mediating. Bodrova suggests that play has changed from children being expected to develop play skills on their own to play that is modeled and taught by adults and teachers.

In addition, the ambiguity of play makes it hard to measure benefits and outcomes. Young children's play is not as easy to measure as learning how to write one's name or say the letters of the alphabet. Teachers feel "obligated to prove that play not only facilitates the development of social competencies but also promotes the learning of pre-academic skills and concepts" (Bodrova and Leong, 2003, p. 1). Even school cultures debate the value of play. Quantitative studies that seek to test the effects of play do not capture the depth of learning and nuanced relationships that play promotes (Wohlwend, 2013).

In recent years there has been a push to mandate science-based programs that reduce literacy to a set of skills. This mandate has trickled down to pre-schools, resulting in the erosion of play's curricular status, giving rise to the possibility that play-based activities will disappear (Kennedy, 2013).

### **How to Support Play**

If we value play and all of its' tangible and intangible benefits, we have to become advocates of play. By building parent and teacher knowledge of the stages of development in literacy we can support play-based literacy. Professional development that builds understanding of what it is to be a reader and a writer will help develop the concept of literacy (Kennedy, 2013). In addition, teachers are "critical decision-makers and powerful enablers who can transform outcomes for all children but especially those most at risk for literacy underachievement" (Kennedy,

p. 554). Bodrova and Leong (2003) advocate that teachers take a primary role in the support of imaginative play. I would also add that parents also need to take a supportive role. Adults can develop more “mature play” (play that has more developed imaginary situations, increasing number of roles, clearly defined rules, flexible themes, extensive use of language, and longer length of play) by helping children plan play in advance, providing multipurpose props that can be used in more than one way, and by using field trips, literature, and videos to expand play themes and roles (Bodrova and Leong). Supporting play through giving play space both in curriculum planning and physical space, and understanding play’s value will go a long way to keeping play in home and school environments.

### **Best Ways to Support Early Literacy Development at Home**

In addition to supporting children’s play at home (by parents giving space and time for play and taking an active role), there are other ways that parents can support their child’s early literacy development. The next section examines research on speaking, reading, and print in the context of the home environment.

#### **Oral Language**

Oral language facilitates and mediates play and is part of a child’s every day life. Listening and speaking develops naturally as children interact with their caregivers and peers. Language is one of the most important milestones that occurs during early childhood (Adams, 1990). Samuelson and Smith (2005) state that because of the close connection of abstract and social development and literacy

skills and school success, language skills are critical precursors for all aspects of development (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2001). Vocabulary development is significant to literacy development. The size and quality of a child's vocabulary upon entry into school is documented as having a significant influence on children's education (Hart & Risley, 1995). Children with large vocabularies are unlikely to have difficulties learning to read. Unfortunately, a large vocabulary correlates with social class. Hart and Risley's longitudinal study of 42 families investigated children's exposure to vocabulary from six families that lived on welfare, 23 families with a working-class parent, and 13 families that had a parent that was a professional. Children were observed and audiotaped in the home for one hour a month between the ages of six months and three years. Everything said to, by, and around the children was recorded. Data was collected for ten years resulting in 1,300 hours of direct observation. Results demonstrated extreme differences between the social classes resulted in differences in vocabulary acquisition between those growing up with low socioeconomic status versus those in affluent families. Those children raised in lower socioeconomic families were exposed to an average of 600 words per hour while those raised in families with at least one professional were exposed to an average of 2100 words per hour (Hart and Risely, 1995). An intelligence test given at age three demonstrated positive correlation between number of words and higher IQ scores. A larger study with more participants would substantiate their initial research. In their 1999 book, *The Social Words of Children Learning to Talk*, Hart and Risley discuss "talkativeness" of families and how this

positively influences the development of vocabulary, knowledge, and verbal expression.

A larger longitudinal study by Lee (2011), using data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Development (NICHD) study of Early Child Care and Youth Development with 1,137 “typically developing” children from the U.S. investigated the relationship between early oral language ability at age two and literacy development up to age eleven. Language was measured at 24 months using the MacArthur Bates CDI and the preschool Language scale and at 36 months with the Reynell Developmental Language scale. Woodcock-Johnson subtests, including letter-word identification at 54 months, and a picture vocabulary subtest were used in 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grades to measure literacy. Word attack subtests were used in 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, and a passage comprehension test in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. Results revealed that children at age two who possessed a larger vocabulary size (460 plus words) outperformed those with smaller vocabularies (less than 230 words) in later language development, expressive language abilities at 36 and 54 months, and in preschool verbal comprehension. Children in the larger vocabulary group continued to demonstrate an increase in vocabulary size in the ensuing years (1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade), decoding skills, word recognition, and passage comprehension tests. Similar to Hart and Risley’s (1995) study, children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds performed better than children from lower income families in all 16 language outcomes and girls demonstrated higher verbal comprehension and expressive language than boys up to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

Toddlers benefit from an emphasis on vocabulary (Lee, 2009). Literacy development in the early years includes listening comprehension, speech production and speech discrimination, vocabulary development, verbal expression, and phonological awareness (Southern Early Childhood Association, 2002). “Oral language is the foundation on which reading is built, and it continues to serve this role as children develop as readers” (Hiebert, 1998, p. 12). Children learn to communicate through listening and responding through talk before they read and write and continue to use talk as they develop their skills in reading and writing. Oral language and literacy develop together as what children learn from reading and writing contributes to an ability to read and write and vice versa (Strickland, 2004). Unfortunately, those children that fall behind in oral language and literacy development are less likely to become successful early readers and tend to become delayed in their primary years and in later years (Juel, 1988).

Rescoria’s (2002) study of late-talking toddlers confirms the link between delays in literacy skills and oral expressive language. 34 toddlers identified as late talkers between the ages of 24 and 31 months of age were matched by socioeconomic status, age, and nonverbal ability to 25 typically developing children. The late talkers had normal nonverbal ability and receptive language at the beginning of the study. The majority of children in this study were schooled for the ensuing years without intervention or little intervention. Language and reading outcomes were measured again when the children were 6 and 9 years old in a two-hour session. Receptive and expressive vocabulary and grammar, verbal fluency, sentence formulation, verbal memory, phonological awareness, reading, spelling,

and writing were measured. Late talkers performed in the average range on most language tasks by age 5 but had significantly poorer scores on most language measures until age 9 and had slightly less skill in reading and spelling at ages 8 and 9 than the typically developing children. Findings suggest that late-talkers, without intervention, lag in the acquisition and development of a broad range of language related skills into middle childhood (Rescoria, 2002).

From a literacy-as-a-social-practice perspective, the next study focuses on how parents create a multidimensional and mutually-engaging process with their young children as they learn to speak. Part of this study included young children's choice and exercise of personal power. As Carr (2001) suggests, children's agency to choose and participate in learning has an important effect on learning during the preschool years (Makin, 2006). 10 Australian babies, aged 8-12 months and their mothers interacted in shared-reading sessions demonstrating individual patterns of language use, discourse, structure, and paralinguistic interaction. Individual differences in children's dispositions to engage in the activity were also demonstrated. The sessions were videotaped for ten minutes, the tapes were transcribed, and visual data and transcripts were analyzed for linguistic and paralinguistic features. Infant vocalizations were examined to determine how mothers responded to their babies' vocalizations, worked on their expectations of the interaction with their child, and scaffolded the babies to help them meet their expectations. Mothers demonstrated a wide variety of verbal and non-verbal strategies used to draw attention of the babies to the text. Although a 10-minute videotaped session in an unfamiliar environment is not typical of a shared reading

session taking place at home, the sessions demonstrated the desired interaction. Babies that are encouraged to engage at home in shared reading on a frequent basis become part of a literacy community (Makin, 2006). In this study the majority of mothers demonstrated literacy as an enjoyable and meaningful part of who they are and what they do. Early childhood shared reading needs to focus on scaffolding knowledge as well as fostering and supporting active engagement (Makin, 2006).

One way to foster engagement and support oral language development is through dialogic reading. Conversations are a primary tool for language development. Dialogic reading is a form of shared book reading where parents converse with their child as they read a book to them. Developed by Whitehurst and Lonigan, (1988) this method emphasizes the role of feedback and adult-child scaffolded interactions while sharing picture books. Dialogic Reading (DR) has been found to make positive gains on children's language skills, especially vocabulary (Chow & McBride-Chang, 2003; Hargrave and Senechal, 2000). A study by Chow, Chang, Cheung, and Chow (2008) examined the effects of shared reading and metalinguistic training on the language and literacy skills of 148 kindergarten children in Hong Kong. Kindergarten children, aged 3, were pretested on Chinese character recognition, vocabulary, morphological awareness, and reading interest. Children were then assigned randomly to one of four groups: dialogic reading with morphology training, dialogic reading, typical reading, or the control group. Parents were trained in DR and morphology training groups for one hour in these associated skills before reading to their children. After 12 weeks of interaction in one of the methods highlighted by the groups, the children were retested. Results showed that

the DR reading groups had greater gains in vocabulary and those in the morphology group also had greater gains in morphological awareness and character recognition. In addition those in the DR group showed a gain in interest in reading. Although the Chinese language system is different than English, the relationship between phonological awareness and word reading and letter recognition in alphabetic languages can be compared (Chow et al., 2008). Having good phonological awareness develops vocabulary by improving the ability to sound out individual letters and sequences of letters. Dialogic reading is one method of supporting increased language development in children.

Other methods are useful in developing dialog and the development of oral language. Self-talk, a stimulation strategy, is a method whereby an adult or partner that is a bit more advanced in their language, scaffolds the language ability of the child by talking about what she or he is doing, thinking or feeling (Owens, 2004 as cited in Bingham and Pennington, 2007). The conversation should be one or two words above the level of the child to enable the child to work in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Another focused stimulation strategy is parallel talk. In this method, the conversation is articulated by the adult, matching the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the child with the words of the adult. New words are introduced and vocabulary is supported. As adults join the conversation they promote learning about language and demonstrate how to make sense of the culture's linguistic categories and construct meaning (Wells, 2007). Simultaneously, children learn both the language of the community and their communities' theory of experience. Again, the sentence

level should be just a level or two higher than the child's to promote working within their ZPD (Bingham and Pennington, 2007).

One other conversational strategy mentioned by Bingham and Pennington (2004) to promote oral language is expansion. After listening to the child, the adult responds by adding to the child's words and using adult-like grammatical structures (Camarata, Nelson, and Camarata, 1994; Manolsen, 1992; Owens, 2004 as cited in Bingham & Pennington). Thoughts and concepts are supported by adding more mature or correct structures, to maintain the child's dialog, and clarify the topic. Expansion is perceived by children as a cue to imitate the adult (Scherer & Olswang, 1984). These methods help the child develop oral language skills and encourage positive interaction through conversation.

## **Reading**

Spoken language and reading have much in common. Children with strong oral language abilities, particularly those that understand the meaning of words, syntax, and semantic relationships among those words, have greater comprehension of text (Kennedy et al., 2012). According to Saada-Robert (2004, as cited in Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2007), children's early language development is considered to be an effective forecast of children's early reading abilities related to alphabet and book concepts and metalinguistic awareness. If children arrive with a strong oral language base, they can build upon that base as they learn to read.

To promote children's early literacy development and learning to read, literacy-rich environments that support social interaction, peer collaboration, problem-solving, and activities related to real-life need to be created. Reading,

writing, listening, viewing, and speaking should be integrated, with ample time and space to create, play, explore, and manipulate (Southern Early Childhood Association, 2002). Positive association of reading with pleasure and success promotes a child's desire to read. Hay and Fielding-Barnsley report on large scale international research studies on the factors that influence children's reading achievement (2007). These five home factors include: regular engagement in pre-school literacy activities, talking at home, a large number of books in the home, amount of time parents read to their children, and the attitude towards reading of both the child and parent. All of these factors contribute to later literacy development. Although socioeconomic status has been recorded as a factor in vocabulary development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Lee, 2009) and later reading achievement scores (White, 1982, as cited in Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2007), White noted that SES studied alone was a weak predictor when it came to specific home factors. He argued that the social and literacy enhancement activities such as shared reading and discussing stories and vocabulary with children were associated with children's literacy development (1982).

### **Shared Book Reading**

Experts recommend that parents read aloud to their children in an interactive manner (NELP, 2008) to support their early literacy development. Research generally confirms that shared book reading promotes children's early literacy development as oral language, vocabulary, print knowledge, and other literacy skills are developed (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2014). Paramount to understanding shared book reading is awareness of the bidirectional interaction

between parent and child. Parents may ask questions about the text, use verbal and nonverbal cues, and encourage the child to respond by engaging in social interaction. Children learn to respond and model adult literacy behaviors (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2014). Edwards study of home learning environments(2014) revealed that toddlers displayed many early literacy behaviors including those associated with the written language awareness domain suggesting that parents may contribute to early literacy development.

### **Environmental Print**

Children are exposed to print in other forms other than storybooks such as environmental print. Environmental print is ubiquitous and provides children with early print experiences Neumann et al., (2013). Environmental print includes billboards, clothing, cereal boxes, road signs, and toy packaging. Usually the print appears in bold, large, capitals, and colorful graphic displays with visual cues. Frith (1985, as cited in Neumann et al., 2013) suggest that children use logographic reading, or the salient visual cues, and logos to decode environmental print, rather than their undeveloped letter-sound analysis.

The availability of environmental print provides opportunities to decode print in children's natural environments. As environmental print surrounds us, it provides more opportunities than storybook reading to interact with print (Neumann, 2013). Neumann et al.'s study was built on existing research to determine to what extent environmental print supports emergent literacy and print motivation in preschoolers. 73 typically developing preschool children from middle class families in Queensland, Australia took part in this study. Three-and-a-half to

four-and-a-half year-old children were randomly assigned to groups that were using standard print, environmental print, or no intervention. The intervention groups were taught letter training in 30-minute sessions for eight weeks using either environmental or manuscript print. Children were assessed in letter-name and sound knowledge, letter writing, print concepts, environmental print reading, standard print reading, print motivation, and receptive vocabulary. These tests were administered prior to, immediately after the intervention, and two months after the intervention. Results demonstrated that the environmental print group showed higher print motivation after the intervention than the standard print and control groups in letter-name and sound knowledge, letter writing, standard print reading, print concepts, and print motivation. Encouraging parents to utilize environmental print in the home environment by referring to labels and logos, may boost young children's early literacy and print motivation. (Neumann et al., 2013). More research with children from varied SES backgrounds would help determine if children from different SES backgrounds respond favorably to environmental print.

Purcell-Gates foundational study (1996) observed the frequency of literacy events and the use of environmental print and other non-traditional literacy interactions in 24 low SES families. This one-year descriptive study observed daily life within the homes of families and preschool- first grade children with the goal of studying one aggregated week. Researchers observed all of the functional uses of literacy in the home context including all instances of the uses of print and talk about print. Data included observation, field notes that included evidence of reading and writing by family members, and note of all materials found in the home related

to literacy. Children's written language knowledge was assessed for intentionality, knowledge, alphabetic principle knowledge, concepts of writing, and concepts of print. Field notes and participant structures of the literacy events were coded. A large variability in the type and frequency of literacy events taking place in the homes was noted. Results showed that children's understanding of print related to the frequency and their focus and personal involvement of the literacy events that take place in the home. In homes where families read and wrote for their own leisure and entertainment children knew more about the alphabet and written language. When children entered formal schooling, parent's engagement in supporting literacy involvement rose. In addition, the majority of print used in the homes included environmental print rather than storybooks (Purcell-Gates, 1996). Lists, TV guides, cereal boxes, and flyers were some of the types of print used in these homes.

### **Phonologic Awareness**

In addition to the home reading environment, other factors play a role in supporting children's early reading development. One factor is phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and segment words into individual sounds and the ability to manipulate these sounds (as in the ability to rhyme, segment words into syllables, and blend individual sounds into words). Edwards (2014) study extended the findings of a previous study that she performed in 2006 with young children aged 18-36 months of age during shared reading interactions in which she concluded that mothers provided high quality home environments and literacy environments that prepared children for the emergence

of phonological skills needed to become fluent in reading. In Edwards (2014) current study, home learning environments were examined to deepen the understanding of home literacy exposure during toddlerhood. Fifteen mother toddler dyads from upper middle class SES backgrounds and mainly Caucasian, were observed at home for one month in an ethnographic interview which included a spontaneous speech sample and measure of language level. Two shared reading sessions were videotaped. Parents completed a questionnaire on home literacy environment and parental beliefs and practices. Results showed that mothers engaged in several emergent literacy behaviors with toddlers during shared reading related to written language awareness. No phonological awareness skills were observed, only written language behaviors such as pointing to the text, turning pages, and talking about the text. Edwards suggest that since phonological awareness skills are considered to develop as children grow older (preschool age and older) these skills would not be seen in shared book reading with this age group (2014). Studying a greater sample size and including a wider SES background would help validate this study for other populations. Edwards also concludes that reading with children can contribute to the written language awareness domain (2014). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) also connected oral language skills including phonological processing to later conventional skills of reading and writing. Skills such as letter name knowledge and phonological awareness are important as a child learns to read (Kennedy et al., 2012).

Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, and Jared (2006) studied 474 children, ages 48 to 83 months of age and from well-educated families to explore children's early

understanding of visual and orthographic aspects of print and how this related to early reading acquisition. Phonological sensitivity, reading achievement, and visual/orthographic knowledge was measured. In addition, parents completed a home literacy questionnaire. Although results demonstrated that the relation between print knowledge and visual/orthographic skills is stronger than the relation to phonological skills in reading, phonological skills were still related to print knowledge in reading development (Levy et al., 2006).

### **Letter Knowledge**

Another factor related to early literacy development is alphabet knowledge. According to the National Early Literacy Panel (2009) alphabet knowledge in kindergarten is one of the strongest predictors of reading achievement in later years. The Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2003) study extended Whitehurst et al.'s (1994) study of dialogic reading and included more activities that supported parents to develop concepts of print, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge in their preschool children. 26 pre-kindergarten children and 23 children in the control group from families that had a member with a learning disability were studied. Parents learned how to provide instruction to facilitate their children's reading. For eight weeks, parents were supported with informative videotapes, a pre-reading booklet, and telephone support by an experienced literacy teacher. Books were selected that included alphabet books, rhyming books, fictional books, and traditional songs. Each parent read each of the eight books to their child at least six times over the eight-week intervention. Children were tested in the early fall and again in November of their kindergarten year. Receptive language, rhyming

ability, print concepts, and letter-sound naming were tested. In the second test, the first measures were repeated except for the letter-sound naming. Spelling and reading tests were added. Results demonstrated an increase in parental reading and success in home-literacy interventions. In addition, indications support that alphabet instruction helps develop phonemic awareness (Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie, 2003). Although this study had a small number of participants, this study demonstrates that utilizing a reading intervention before formal schooling has positive effects on reading skills.

### **Home Environment and Parental Help Support In-School Literacy**

Whether children learn early literacy skills through shared book reading or environmental print, the home environment provides the foundation for early literacy and helps promote children's positive attitudes, reading skills, and self-concept as a reader. Books in the home, family members modeling reading behaviors, and the inclusion of literacy activities supports the skills for school. First and foremost, positive parental attitudes toward reading and literacy create a supportive home environment. Baker and Scher (2002, as cited in Kennedy and Trong, 2010) noted that parents who enjoyed reading for pleasure had children that had higher motivation as readers. Kennedy and Trong used Progress in International Reading Studies (PIRLS) 2006 data from 46 different international educational systems to study how home factors influence students' motivation to read and the relationship between motivation to read and reading achievement. Reading outcomes including self-concept, enjoyment, and achievement in grade 4 were measured. This study included data from over 210,000 students and their

parents. Data included student reading achievement test scores, student background questionnaires, and home background questionnaires. Parent reading enjoyment, home literacy environment, parents' report of their child's school readiness, student reading enjoyment, student reading self-concept, and student reading achievement were measured. Results showed the importance of a supportive home environment and positive reading motivation on fourth-grade reading achievement. Findings confirm the effect of parents' values of reading as confirmed by their reading behaviors, have a positive effect on the literacy environment created at home. Children's acquisition of literacy skills previous to school prepared them for reading in the fourth-grade with a lasting positive effect on their attitudes towards reading.

Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal's (2005) study of the role of home literacy practices in preschool language and literacy skills confirms Kennedy and Trong's (2010) study about the importance of a supportive home environment. 72 African American children, aged between 18 and five years and their mothers from low-income families were interviewed and measured annually. Four measures of home literacy practices including shared book reading frequency of reading, maternal reading strategies, child's enjoyment of reading, and maternal sensitivity were examined through observation, interviews, and assessment. Results showed that overall maternal responsiveness and quality of the home environment including maternal sensitivity was the strongest predictor of language and early literacy skills (Roberts et al., 2005). Testing more children from different ethnic backgrounds and including a range of SES backgrounds would help confirm these results.

Anyikwa and Obidike's (2012) study of the ways parents can and do act as resources for their children addresses the different ways that literacy is valued in homes and families. In this study, ten Nigerian mothers from middle-class neighborhoods and their children were observed in and out of school. Data was gathered in interviews focused on obtaining specific and in-depth information on the mother's thoughts and experiences of their own and their children's literacy education. Data was analyzed through identification of the salient cross-cutting themes and patterns in the parent's perspectives and practices and themes identified. Results showed that some of the ways the participants were involved in their children's literacy education may not fit in the "schoolcentric" definitions of parental involvement given that the mothers interviewed were highly involved in their children's education. Findings included considerable challenges that parents faced being involved in their children's literacy development both at school and at home. Yuen (2011) discussed the importance of parental involvement in school as "a teamwork approach to home-school collaboration" in the exchange of ideas, information, feedback, and comments (p. 157). Like Mui and Anderson, Anyikwa and Obidike concluded that parents are making significant contributions to their children's literacy development both at home and at school. Further research is needed to assess learning outcomes of two groups of children- one from parents who are involved in their children's education, and those who are not. Whitmore and Norton-Meier (2008) affirm the conclusion of Anyikwa and Obidike (2012) in their case studies of two mothers. The purpose of these two case studies was to demonstrate that when mothers' literacy lives are revalued, new home-school

relationships can positively affect literacy learning in the classroom. These two mothers, one from a working class background and the other receiving state aid, each had three children attending a small Midwestern city school in the U.S. Each woman participated in unique ways in her children's educational experiences. Researchers observed family interaction in their households and at school events for more than two years. Data collection included interviews, field notes, observations, and artifacts. The data was analyzed using coding through a generative process of reviewing field notes and transcripts in search of patterns and significant issues. Results identified two mediating conditions present in the relationships the mothers established with the school: first, literacy resources as funds of knowledge that exists in all households and second, symmetric power and trust relationships between individual members of the school community. The researchers concluded that schools need to recognize and validate these 'funds of knowledge' that serve as valuable resources both inside and outside of school. As Flouri and Buchanan (2004) expressed as cited in Anyikwa and Obidike , "Research shows that parental involvement has more positive effect on the education and literacy development of their children than other family background variables..." (p. 58). More research is needed on these "funds of knowledge" to identify resources within marginalized families. As identified above, many researchers confirm the link between parental involvement and children's early literacy development.

## **Summary**

Early literacy learning takes place in many different ways. In this literature review, I have examined some of the ways that early literacy can be supported at home before school entry and supported when the child enters school. First, I have shared theories relating to how children learn to read. Second, I looked at critical factors in early literacy development and how parents can motivate learning. I examined readiness for learning and how this affects and interacts with self-regulation. I explored Indigenous early literacy and some of the factors that affect Aboriginal populations. Play and its' numerous benefits, how it promotes learning, and how to support play was explored along with Tools of the Mind. Third, I have examined the best ways to support early literacy development at home and addressed more traditional forms of literacy including oral language, reading, attention to print, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge. Lastly, I discussed how the home environment and parental help support in-school literacy. Home-school partnerships and funds of knowledge were examined for their contributions to early learning.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Implications for Teaching**

After reviewing the literature on early literacy and to answer my questions concerning the subject of the most effective ways that parents can support their children's early literacy development, I have identified three readings that I recommend my colleagues read. These articles are important and relevant to the

subject of early literacy and parental support. They informed me and shaped my teaching practice.

### **Ecological influences of the home and the child care center on preschool-age children's literacy development**

In a study by Wiegel, & Martin, (2005), the influences of family resources, routines, and stress on preschool children's emergent literacy was studied from a developmental assets framework. Data was collected from 85 children using questionnaires and an assessment of emergent literacy skills at the beginning of the study and one year after the study. Family asset variables, parent-child literacy activities, and children's literacy outcomes were measured. Results demonstrated that the more regular the routines in the household, the more likely parents were to engage their children in literacy enhancing activities which led to higher print knowledge and reading interest. Also, results revealed that although family resources and stress had a negative effect on aspects of literacy development, they had less of an effect than family routines. Overall, the contributions of the family, especially the presence of regular routines in the family, can be viewed as an asset in children's early literacy development. Those designing and implementing programs that focus on strengthening young children's literacy development need to consider the contributions of the family context. The general family context and not just the frequency and quality of parent-child literacy activities are important. Since family assets appears to support the engagement of parent-child activities, promoting a comprehensive approach to parent-child activities including programs that model literacy behaviors and promote positive parental beliefs would be beneficial.

### **At home with the Johars: Another look at family literacy**

The purpose of a study by Mui, & Anderson, (2008) was to share the literacy practices of a six-year old Indo-Canadian girl and her extended family and to challenge predominant conceptions of family literacy. A description of the literacy activities that Genna engages in with the support of her extended family and caregivers is provided. Results showed that although the Johars did not engage in storybook reading, theirs was a literacy-rich environment. Results also demonstrated that family members other than fathers and mothers support young children at home. This study is significant for teachers and educators because it demonstrates numerous literacy practices in this home and that there are different pathways to literacy for children. Second, it illustrates the important roles of other significant family members in supporting literacy development. Third, it shows how highly a nonmainstream family's members value and support school literacy. Finally, Genna is an example of an additive bilingual child who maintains her first language to facilitate her learning to become literate in a second language. It is critically important that educators become familiar with the literacy practices of the families with whom they work.

### **The scaffolding of emergent literacy skills in the home environment: A case study**

The purpose of a case study by Neumann, & Neumann (2009), was to describe how one parent scaffolded her young child's emergent writing and letter knowledge in the home while using environmental print. The mother described how she scaffolded her son's emergent literacy skills from age two to age six prior to

school entry. The descriptions are focused on scaffolding methods used and how they were elicited by environmental print. In addition to the learning of letter names and sounds, the child's writing development was described. Preliminary evidence suggests that the scaffolding approach, incorporating environmental print and a multisensory approach, is a promising approach for supporting early literacy skills, particularly emergent writing skills, alphabet knowledge, and print motivation. The significance of this study is that the scaffolding approach, incorporating environmental print and a multisensory approach, is a promising approach for supporting early literacy skills. A subsequent study of environmental print with 73 children by the same researchers confirmed greater print motivation than children using standard print texts (Neumann et al, 2013). Using this ubiquitous and cost-effective literacy resource may include the use of environmental print for families from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Training parents to refer to environmental print may be an effective way to promote emergent literacy and print motivation.

### **Considerations for Future Research**

Many ideas, considerations, and suggestions for future research arose in the literature review. Often suggestions were made to repeat the study with participants across a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds to determine if the findings held true for all populations. Also, studies with a small number of participants recommended replication of the study using a greater number of participants. A lot of the research recommends follow-up assessment of the participants at a later stage of development to see whether the benefits of

intervention transferred to later grades. In addition to these general recommendations I developed my own recommendations. My top three recommendations for future research are to explore how to strengthen both home and preschool environments to enhance early literacy and language outcomes; to investigate how to support young children's social and relational skills; and to find out whether consistent "good-fit" support in play over a long period of time leads to self-regulation and intellectual development.

### **Conclusion**

Emergent literacy is a young child's attempt to make sense of their world and in this process to interact with others through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When it comes to supporting early literacy, a large body of research exists that promotes developing literacy-rich environments and engaging parents and educators to support a rich learning environment.

I believe that parents can best support their children in early literacy development by modeling an interest in the literate world and interacting with their child through talk, reading, and particularly shared reading. Parents who engage in talking, reading and writing and support their child to do the same on a daily basis reinforce the idea that literacy is important and worthwhile. Giving time and space for play and providing props and guidance will help children develop their ability to play. Arranging play dates to encourage children to interact with their peers will help children develop their social skills. In addition, daily interaction in early

literacy activities in a consistent manner will support the idea that literacy is valued and worthwhile.

Overall, I found that the literature on early literacy agreed with what my district, school, and classroom were endorsing. I was gratified to see that practices that I had employed in my classroom were endorsed by the literature. Personally, I found no new discoveries or ideas that I had not considered before I enrolled in my graduate program. However, I strengthened my understanding of several key ideas in literacy and my resolve to use these in my teaching. Early literacy is a critically important topic—one that teachers need to be well versed in if they are to maximize learning and recommend practices for parents.

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## Appendix A

In my PowerPoint professional presentation in appendix A, I focus on factors that affect early literacy and ways that parents can support early literacy. I begin with home support as an important factor in early literacy development (slide 3). Research demonstrates that before formal schooling begins, language and literacy development takes place in the home environment. Literacy and language skills developed at home during the preschool years are among some of the strongest predictors of school success.

Motivation is another factor important to early literacy development (slide 4). Early learning can be intentional or incidental. Taking advantage of children's individual interests to help motivate learning is one approach to maximize learning. Social and relational skills among the best primary prerequisites for school readiness and they are also the best predictors of children's academic and social functioning at school entry (slides 5 and 6). Social skills are an important part of school readiness. Researchers view socio emotional skills including self-regulation, as skills first developed in the home environment. Not only are social and relational skills among the best indicators for school readiness, they are also the best predictors of children's academic and social functioning at school entry. In addition, if the affective environment of the home is positive and children and parents enjoy shared reading activities, school readiness skills are enhanced. Non-traditional Western literacy practices include knowledge, traditions and cultural practices (slide 7). For Indigenous children, the need to bridge Indigenous family and community cultural and linguistic experiences with school-based literacy

expectations and practices is critical to improving educational outcomes and future success and well-being. Non-traditional Western literacy practices can be supported by one's extended family in literacy-rich environments devoid of storybooks (slide 8). Other family members play an important role in supporting early literacy. For an additive bilingual child, using one's first language to learn another language is facilitative. Play "is the work of children" and is ubiquitous among children around the world (slide 9). Young children are naturally drawn to play and play is an essential way that children develop. Researchers agree that a perspective that only looks at and values cognitive skills is not enough to ensure development in literacy, that affective factors also contribute to literacy development. Children have always played (slide 10). Play in the early years has been linked to development of verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy, and group participation. In addition, play has been linked to readiness for school, and children's ability to master literacy and numeracy. Creating authentic play environments, which mirror real-life situations promote an increase in literacy acts, increasing complexity in play, and increased mastery of language routines used in the setting. Parents can support play by engaging with their children through talk, scaffolding, modeling, and guidance (slide 11).

In addition to supporting children's play at home, there are other ways that parents can support their child's early literacy development. The next section shares research on speaking, reading and print as well as the home environment (slide 12). Listening and speaking develops naturally as children interact with their caregivers

and peers (slides 13 & 14). The size and quality of a child's vocabulary upon entry into school is documented as having a significant influence on children's education. Oral language is the foundation on which reading is built, and it continues to serve this role as children develop as readers (slide 15). Reading to your child has a positive effect on early literacy acquisition (slide 16). Oral language and literacy develop together as what children learn from reading and writing contributes to an ability to read and write and vice versa. Shared book reading promotes children's early literacy development as oral language, vocabulary, print knowledge, and other literacy skills are developed (slide 17). Children are exposed to print in other forms other than storybooks such as environmental print. Environmental print is ubiquitous and provides children with early print experiences (slide 18). The availability of environmental print provides opportunities to decode print in children's natural environments. Another way to support early reading is through phonological development (slide 19). Skills such as letter name knowledge and phonological awareness are important as a child learns to read. According to the National Early Literacy Panel (2009) alphabet knowledge in kindergarten is one of the strongest predictors of reading achievement in later years (slide 20). Families also support literacy with their "funds of knowledge" (slide 21). These funds contain cultural traditions and knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that support the development and reinforcement of literacy. First and foremost, positive parental attitudes toward reading and literacy create a supportive home environment.



# LOOKING AT THE LITERATURE: HOW PARENTS CAN SUPPORT THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Linda Kusleika

June 28, 2014



# CRITICAL FACTORS IN EARLY LITERACY ACQUISITION



# HOME SUPPORT



# MOTIVATING LEARNING



# READINESS FOR LEARNING



# SELF-REGULATION



# NON-TRADITIONAL WESTERN LITERACY PRACTICES



# INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING



Courtesy: Friends of India, Newfoundland

# PLAY



# CHILDREN HAVE ALWAYS PLAYED



# HOW TO SUPPORT PLAY



# BEST WAYS TO SUPPORT EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AT HOME



# ORAL LANGUAGE



# ORAL LANGUAGE



# TALKING



# READ TO YOUR CHILD



# SHARED BOOK READING



# ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT



# PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS



# LETTER KNOWLEDGE



# FAMILIES HAVE FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

