

Chapter 6

The Early Childhood Project: A 5-Year Longitudinal Investigation of Children's Literacy Development in Sociocultural Context

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Abstract The Early Childhood Project examined the *intimate culture* of young children's homes, defined by a confluence of parental beliefs, recurrent activities, and interactive processes, and the relation between that intimate culture and the children's literacy development. The children in the 5-year longitudinal study came from low- and middle-income families of European-American and African-American heritage. Families joined the project when the children were in prekindergarten or kindergarten. Results showed the importance of parental beliefs and children's home experiences to children's literacy development. Although low and middle income children had somewhat different home literacy experiences, the intimate culture of the home was a more powerful predictor of literacy development than demographic factors such as family income and ethnicity. Children coming from an intimate culture that emphasized an entertainment approach, one that focuses on making interactions enjoyable and engaging for young children, were more likely to be involved in affectively positive reading interactions with their caregivers, to engage in frequent interactions with age-appropriate text, and, consequently to benefit in the development of literacy competencies.

Many children in literate societies such as the United States struggle to learn to read, and a sizeable percentage fail to master all but the most basic skills. A recent assessment using a nationally representative sample from the United States found that over 30% of fourth graders do not read well enough to understand grade level texts (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005). Children from low-income or minority backgrounds are more often found among those who are not successful (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

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The Early Childhood Project was motivated by the desire to extend our understanding of literacy development in children from different sociocultural backgrounds. This chapter focuses on one aspect of the project – the relation between children’s home experiences and their literacy development. Home experiences included the beliefs parents held about how their children learn and their own role in such learning, as well as the nature and frequency of children’s engagement in literacy-relevant activities. Other components of the project addressed teachers’ beliefs about how to foster literacy development, the nature and frequency of children’s activities at school, the relations between teachers’ and parents’ beliefs about learning, and the similarities and differences in how teachers and parents viewed the children. A complete description of the *Early Childhood Project* was published in our monograph, *Becoming Literate in the City* (Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005).¹

The study took place in Baltimore, Maryland, from 1992 to 1997. Baltimore, located on the eastern seaboard of the United States, is the largest city in Maryland with a population of about 743,000. According to the 1990 US census data, 59% of Baltimore residents were black, 39% were white. Forty percent of the adult residents of the city reportedly did not graduate from high school. The *Early Childhood Project* followed the lives of a cohort of children enrolled in Baltimore’s public schools. The majority of the children attending Baltimore City Public Schools were black. There is a fairly high mobility rate for students enrolled in the city’s public school system – about 25% of children in low-income schools transfer to another school or withdraw from the system each year. As is common in many city school systems, a large percentage of children attending the Baltimore City Public Schools earn low scores on state-administered reading and math assessments. Many do not graduate. For example, 63% of the students who should have graduated in 1994 did not.

The children participating in the project were growing up in low- and middle-income families of European-American and African-American heritage. Children were in prekindergarten at the start of the project and in third grade at the end. Of particular interest were the literacy-related home experiences of children traditionally more at-risk for educational difficulties, that is, low-income or African-American children. The theoretical framework was influenced by systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), conceptualizations of the eco-cultural niche of child development (Super & Harkness, 1997), neo-Vygotskian theory (Rogoff, 1990), and emergent literacy perspectives (e.g., Sulzby & Teale, 1991). We hypothesized that the historical legacy of racial and economic oppression in America has placed low-income and African-American children at risk for school failure by isolating their families from cultural practices and beliefs that match the demands of the school curriculum. We sought to document in detail how the developmental niche of different social addresses within the city of Baltimore structures children’s early opportunities for participatory appropriation of the cultural practice of literacy. Although income level and ethnicity were taken into account in sample selection and data analyses, social address was found to

¹ Several of the findings described in this chapter appeared in separate publications as well as in our monograph.

carry less explanatory power than the *intimate culture* of a child's home, defined as a confluence of parental beliefs, recurrent activities, and interactive processes.

This chapter begins with an overview of the techniques used to understand parents' beliefs about their role in their children's learning and to document the nature of children's experiences and literacy development. The *Intimate Culture* section consists of two parts. The first highlights the nature of parents' beliefs about how to foster literacy development and the types of activities children engaged in. The second part covers qualitative aspects of children's literacy interactions with their family members. The *Children's Literacy Competencies* section begins with a summary of our findings of literacy development of the children in our study and goes on to relate growth in competencies to the children's home experiences.

Methods Used in the Early Childhood Project

Our recruitment strategy was designed to maximize the chance of recruiting those families with children traditionally most at risk for educational difficulties. Such families often are reluctant to participate in research and are difficult to recruit. In addition to the common practice of sending home letters to parents of children enrolled in the target schools, we scheduled in-person meetings before and after school. We also tried to meet informally with parents when they dropped their children off or picked them up from school. We reasoned that we would be more successful in recruiting the historically most reluctant parents through less formal means of contact than in large, less individualized group meetings. To make families feel comfortable, we used recruiters who were matched on ethnicity with the target family.

We succeeded in recruiting 81 African-American and European-American families from low-income or middle-income backgrounds. Due to the timing of our funding, about half the families were recruited when children were in prekindergarten ($N=40$) and the remainder ($N=41$) when the children were completing kindergarten. A subset of 63 children and their families remained in the study through the end of third grade. The percentage of families who did not continue is consistent with attrition rates in other longitudinal studies (e.g., Leseman & de Jong, 1998).

We conducted annual in-depth interviews with children's parents about their beliefs and practices. We observed literacy-related interactions between children and parents, children and their siblings.² Each spring we assessed children's literacy competencies using a range of measures. When children were in prekindergarten and kindergarten we assessed their orientation toward print, phonological awareness, and narrative competencies. When they began first grade, we included standardized measures of decoding, word recognition, and reading comprehension (the

²We discuss here only methods used for collecting information about children's home experiences and their literacy competencies. See Serpell et al. (2005) for methods used to document teachers' beliefs and practices.

latter was assessed only in third grade). Included in our measures were several that assessed children's functional knowledge of print. These latter tasks allowed us to investigate how children fared on tests more tailored to their individual experiences.

The scope of the study was noteworthy in several respects. We assessed a wider array of literacy competencies than is common. We documented experiences children had involving oral and written forms of language. We noted with whom children interacted when they engaged in various activities and observed several literacy interactions. We coded not only the cognitive-linguistic aspects of these literacy interactions (e.g., the nature of the talk) but also the affective quality of the interactions. We extensively probed parents' beliefs about children's literacy development, an area that has been understudied. In doing so, we took great care to make our interviews relevant and understandable for parents whose own literacy skills were limited. We also focused on children's reading motivation, another understudied topic. Throughout the study we interwove qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis.

The Intimate Culture of a Child's Home

Parents' Beliefs and Children's Activities

The intimate culture of a child's home was documented through in-depth interviews with parents, typically the mothers, about their beliefs and practices. Immediately after enlisting a family, parents were asked to keep a 1-week semi-structured diary of their children's activities. Parents were asked to record all activities that occurred within a time period (e.g., getting up activities and so on). We purposely did not tell them to include only literacy activities so as not to bias responses. Subsequent interviews began by grounding questions in practices noted in the diaries. Parents completed at least one in-depth semi-structured interview each year addressing their beliefs about children's literacy appropriation. For example, during one of the interviews from the first year of the project, parents were asked a series of questions about what they can do to assist their children in acquiring age-appropriate cognitive, academic, and social competencies. Of particular interest for this chapter were responses to the question "What is the best way to help your child learn to read?" Each year parents also completed an ecological inventory probing the nature and frequency of their child's participation in a broad range of literacy-relevant activities. The specific activities were modified as the children got older to reflect age-appropriate experiences. All of the interviews and questionnaires were administered in person with the parents.

The diaries were quite variable in length and content. Some contained few entries with limited descriptive information, whereas others were very detailed. The diaries were coded for the types of literacy activities mentioned as well as whether they reflected an *entertainment* or a *skills* perspective in context. The

coding was adapted from work by Teale (1986) and Goldenberg, Reese, and Gallimore (1992) who observed directly the print-related activities that occurred in the homes of children from low-income backgrounds. Entertainment activities included shared book reading, independent initiating of looking at or reading books, playing with print, and so on. Skills activities were those that focused on practicing literacy skills by using flashcards or workbooks for learning letters, letter sounds, or words. Responses to the question "What is the best way to help your child learn to read" were similarly coded for an entertainment or skills perspective. An entertainment perspective focused on making the interaction enjoyable for the child, whereas a skills perspective emphasized inculcating skills. Scores for an entertainment home orientation and a skills home orientation were computed for each family by averaging scores from the diary and interview question.

Note that we also used a second means of assessing parent's beliefs about fostering literacy. We asked parents to rate the importance for young children's literacy development of participating in various common, everyday activities. Some of the activities were more consonant with an entertainment approach and others with a skills approach. The pattern of findings for these two means of analyzing parents' beliefs (responses to the "What is the best way ..." question and rating of activities) about how to facilitate children's literacy development was similar.

Parents expressed consistent beliefs about how to help their children become literate. Some parents emphasized the importance of making reading experiences enjoyable and allowing the child to play a role in initiating activities, whereas others focused more on teaching skills directly. More low-income parents than middle-income ones emphasized skills inculcation. These findings are consistent with those of other researchers who have found systematic differences in literacy-learning beliefs among parents from different sociocultural backgrounds (e.g., Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). For example, Goldenberg et al. (1992) interpreted their findings with low-income Hispanic families in Los Angeles as demonstrating that parents believed that "learning to read (not necessarily the act of reading itself) is a process of learning decoding and other skills, not a process driven by children's interest in making meaning from texts" (p. 504).

The types of literacy activities parents offered their children reflected their beliefs about how to facilitate children's literacy development. Parents who favored an entertainment orientation focused on making reading experiences enjoyable and allowing the child to play a role in initiating activities. For example, a middle-income European-American mother stated, "If I picked out the book, I picked out a book that I thought was a good story, something that I would enjoy too at that age. You know things we could enjoy together." These parents reported more frequent engagement with activities consonant with such an approach, such as reading storybooks, chapter books, playing games involving print, and telling stories. Parents who advocated an approach more oriented toward skills talked about having their children use workbooks and flash cards. The parent of a low-income European-American child talked about "Just getting him to practice."

A similar relation between the nature of beliefs espoused by parents and children's activities was found by Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, and Shapiro (2006) among parents of preschoolers in western Canada. Parents who endorsed what Lynch and colleagues called holistic beliefs were more likely to report their children played literacy-related games and read with them; parents with skills-based beliefs were more likely to report they taught their children to recognize letters and write their names and that their children used workbooks.

We turn next to findings from the *Early Childhood Project* about the types of literacy activities children engaged in. Several years ago, Purcell-Gates (2000) noted that almost all children growing up in the United States (and presumably other industrialized countries) have frequent exposure to print. Exposure itself is not the issue. What is important is the nature and frequency of the exposure and how it changes with development, because reading challenging and age-appropriate text is important for growth in reading competencies (Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Byrnes, 2000). The results from our study confirm the need to document the type of exposure children have, given the consistent sociocultural differences we found.

Children from middle-income European-American families in the *Early Childhood Project* had more frequent experiences than low-income or African-American children with texts that are more conducive to literacy development, that is, storybooks and chapter books. In contrast, African-American children more frequently read less developmentally advanced text, such as picture books, even when they were in third grade. Differences in the frequency with which children read certain types of text were evident in prekindergarten. Almost all the parents reported that their prekindergarten children read storybooks at least periodically, but families differed in the frequency with which children read such texts. One hundred percent of the middle-income children did this on a daily basis whereas 45% of the low-income children did. Although most studies of reading interactions have focused on the impact of storybook reading, reading preschool books (ABC books) has been shown to be more strongly related to children's acquisition of knowledge about print (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988). More of the middle-income prekindergarteners than the low-income ones read preschool books at least weekly.

Another way we considered the import of children's home experiences was by selecting two groups of children with different literacy competencies at the end of the study and comparing their reading activities over the course of the project. We compared a group of children who were reading on or above grade level at the end of third grade with a group reading at least a year below grade level. We excluded children whose scores fell between the cut-offs for the two comparison groups. There were consistent differences in the frequency with which children in the two groups read and the type of text read. Children who read on or above grade level at the end of third grade engaged in daily, age-appropriate reading activities at home. They read storybooks and preschool books (e.g., ABC books) in prekindergarten, and by second grade they

read chapter books. In contrast, children who read below grade level at the end of third grade were far less likely to have engaged in daily reading activities. More low-income children, particularly African-Americans, were represented in the below grade level group.

The Nature of Children's Engagement with Literacy-Relevant Activities

Much of the early research on literacy-related home experiences focused on the frequency of storybook reading (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). Researchers found a weak but significant relation between reading activity and literacy acquisition, such that children who were read to more frequently had higher scores on measures of emergent literacy. This type of correlation, however, does not tell us anything about the importance of what occurs during reading activities. The focus more recently has been on the nature of the adult-child interactions, most typically the type of conversation that takes place during shared storybook reading. Researchers have examined the amount of conversation that goes beyond the factual elements in the text to include the non-immediate context as well as talk about aspects of the print. Snow (1994) has suggested that non-immediate talk is pertinent for more advanced language development as well as understanding text. As previously noted talk about print facilitates decoding and word recognition skills.

In the Early Childhood Project, we observed children engaging in storybook reading interactions with others on two different occasions, at the beginning of kindergarten and again toward the end of first grade. Both observations were videotaped and took place within the children's homes. During kindergarten, children were observed reading a book of their own choosing with the person who most typically read with them. Most children read with an adult, typically their mother. Slightly less than a third of the children were read to by an older sibling. The difference in reading partners allowed us to consider any differences in the interactions as a function of the age of the reader. Most researchers studying reading interactions have observed adult-child dyads. However, siblings may play a larger role in socializing their younger siblings in low-income than in middle-income families (Heath, 1983). Thus, it is important to extend observations of reading interactions to sibling dyads. During first grade, we provided a book unfamiliar to the children and asked that the mothers or primary caregivers read it with their child. Interactions were coded for the nature of conversation about the book, including talk about immediate and non-immediate context and talk about print, and the affective quality of the interactions.

Although many other researchers have considered the type of talk that occurs in reading interactions, few have considered the social-affective quality (cf., Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988; Leseman, & de Jong, 1998). Videotapes were reviewed for observable behaviors that reflected an enjoyable, engaging interaction. The mother's

behavior was coded for reading expression, physical and visual contact with the child, appearance of engagement in the activity, and sensitivity to the child's engagement. The child's behavior was coded for the appearance of engagement. In addition to describing qualitative aspects of the reading interactions, we examined relations between the interactions and components of literacy development. In addition to measures already discussed, we also assessed children's reading motivation, a predictor of frequency of engagement as well as a literacy-related outcome in its own right.

Reading motivation was assessed with a measure, developed for this study, which addressed the multidimensional nature of motivation. That is, children may be motivated to read for a variety of reasons – because it is viewed as enjoyable, is a valuable skill, affords an opportunity for social interaction and receiving praise from others. Children were asked to choose which of two statements about reading motivation was more similar to their own views. That is, they were shown two puppets, Regal and Cha-Cha, read descriptions of each puppet and asked to choose which puppet they were more like. For example, “Regal likes to read but Cha Cha doesn't like to read. Who are you more like?” After choosing one of the puppets the child was asked, “Are you a lot like Regal/Cha-Cha, or just a little?” Children were read 16 statements tapping the four components of reading motivation: enjoyment, perceived value of reading, perceived competence in reading, interest in library-related activities.

The most common type of talk during the storybook reading interactions was about the immediate context (e.g., factual elements about the story). Forty-five percent of remarks were coded as being about the immediate context. Such remarks were positively related to children's motivation for reading in first grade. Consistent with what others have found, there was little discussion about print during storybook reading interactions when children were entering kindergarten or were in first grade. Discussion about print typically occurred when children read to their mothers and made reading errors (in first grade).

The affective quality of reading interactions when children were entering *kindergarten* was related to children's motivation for reading in first and second grade which predicted the frequency with which children read challenging text. The affective quality of reading interactions in *first grade* was negatively related to the frequency with which print was discussed. Affective quality also was related to the frequency with which children engaged in chapter book reading in second and third grade which, in turn, predicted reading competencies in third grade. The affective quality of the reading interactions was positively and significantly related to an entertainment home orientation.

Low-income children were less likely to experience shared storybook reading with an adult than were middle-income children; instead, they were read to by their older siblings. The difference in reading partners has implications for subsequent outcomes. The siblings were less fluent readers than the children's parents and were less skilled at maintaining the interest of their listeners or refocusing their wandering attention. In addition, the affective quality of the interaction was poorer, with less enjoyment exhibited by reader and listener alike.

Children's Literacy Competencies

When children were in prekindergarten and kindergarten, we assessed their letter knowledge, concepts about print (knowledge of how to hold a book, turn a page), functions of print (ability to label types of print commonly found in their home and neighborhoods and state how these were used), phonological awareness, and nursery rhyme knowledge. We also assessed their ability to answer questions about stories and relate a story of their own. When children were in elementary school we either modified the measure to make it more age-appropriate or chose ones tapping more age-appropriate skills. For example, the functional print tasks now required the child to sort mail, look up on a calendar the day their birthdays occurred and complete a coupon to receive a sticker. We also administered standardized measures of decoding, word recognition, and reading comprehension from the Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement-Revised (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989).

There was great variability in the scores earned by different children. For example, consider scores at the end of third grade, the last time we assessed children's literacy competencies. Children's scores on a word recognition measure administered at the end of the school year ranged from a grade equivalency of 1.0 to 11.9. Forty-seven percent of the children were struggling readers; that is, they received grade equivalency scores at least one grade below expectations. Low-income children earned significantly lower scores on standardized measures of word recognition and reading comprehension than middle-income children, particularly European-American children.

The performance differences among children from different social addresses were first evident in prekindergarten, even on the functional print measures that were tailored to children's individual experiences. Such group-related differences were even greater on more traditional literacy-related measures, that is, those not tailored to the child's own experiences.

Children's phonological analysis skills assessed in prekindergarten and kindergarten, as well as their phonemic analysis skills assessed in grades 1–3, were related to their word recognition and reading comprehension at the end of third grade. Scores on the functional print tasks administered in elementary school also were highly related to children's word recognition scores.

A major source of difficulty for low-income children as they learn to read appears to be mastery of the skills needed to decode the text rather than comprehension. Although we found differences in children's word recognition favoring middle-income children, particularly European-American children, we found no such differences in children's oral story comprehension. In fact, when the same children were asked to retell a story that had just been read to them, low-income African-American children produced better retellings than low-income European-American and middle-income African-American children. This may be an illustration of the oral narrative competence observed by Heath (1983) that is not typically assessed or rewarded in formal schooling.

The Relation Between Aspects of the Intimate Culture and Children's Emerging Competencies

We turn next to a consideration of how the intimate culture of the home, which includes parents' beliefs and the experiences provided for their children, relates to literacy development. Indicators of the home orientation included the composite score from the diary activities and parents' responses to the question about how best to foster young children's literacy development. The data strongly support the notion that if the intimate culture is more consonant with the theme that literacy is a source of entertainment, children's literacy development is facilitated. An entertainment perspective was significantly and positively related to phonological awareness (prekindergarten), orientation toward print (prekindergarten and kindergarten), narrative competence (kindergarten), word recognition (grades 1, 2, 3), reading comprehension (grade 3), and children's use of functional print (grades 1, 2). In all cases (even when the correlation failed to reach significance), the correlation between an entertainment orientation and the specific literacy competency was positive. In contrast, the correlation between a skills orientation and the specific literacy competency was generally either near zero or negative.

Although we have discussed differences in children's outcomes related to their social addresses, such demographic factors are not causally related to children's literacy development but rather are proxies for relevant factors. For example, we conducted a series of regression analyses of factors predicting word recognition and reading comprehension when children were in third grade. Once we entered aspects of the intimate culture into regression equations, no additional variance was accounted for by demographic factors such as income or ethnicity. It is the nature of a child's experiences rather than the family's social address that has a direct effect on literacy development.

Summary

The Early Childhood Project was motivated by the desire to extend our understanding of the relations between children's home experiences and their literacy development. The study examined the *intimate culture* of each child's home, defined by a confluence of parental beliefs, recurrent activities, and interactive processes, and it explored the relation between that intimate culture and the child's literacy development. The children came from low- and middle-income families of European-American and African-American heritage. An important contribution of the project was its demonstration that parental beliefs and qualitative aspects of children's home experiences do make a difference in children's literacy development. Although low- and middle-income children had somewhat different home literacy experiences, consistent with previous research, the intimate culture of the home was a more powerful predictor of literacy development than demographic factors such as family

income and ethnicity. Children coming from an intimate culture that emphasized what we have called an entertainment approach, one that focuses on making interactions enjoyable and engaging for young children, were more likely to be involved in affectively positive reading interactions with their caregivers, to engage in frequent interactions with age-appropriate text, and, consequently to benefit in the development of literacy competencies.

In closing we want to note that home experiences and emergent literacy competencies *prior* to formal schooling are important foundations for subsequent literacy growth, but a child's developmental potential is not fixed at school entry. We identified a group of children whose early literacy skills were in the bottom quarter of the sample but who were in the top third by the end of third grade. In contrast to those children who remained in the bottom quarter, children whose literacy trajectories changed (improved) engaged in daily and varied reading activities at home during elementary school. In addition to reading books, they more frequently participated in storytelling activities, went to the library, and played with educational toys. These findings show the important role that parents play during preschool and early elementary school in guiding their children's literacy development. Equally importantly, the findings have implications for ways to assist families in facilitating their children's development. What children do at home and with whom they do it is important for literacy development; it even can help overcome a slow start toward literacy acquisition.

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