The Routledge International Handbook of early Literacy Education
A Contemporary Guide to Literacy Teaching and Interventions in a Global Context
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Publication details
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Published online on: 27 Mar 2017

How to cite :- Jim Anderson, Ann Anderson, Harini Rajagopal. 27 Mar 2017, Promoting first-language development and maintenance and capitalizing on ‘funds of knowledge’ in family literacy programmes from: The Routledge International Handbook of early Literacy Education, A Contemporary

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PROMOTING FIRST-LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE AND CAPITALIZING ON ‘FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE’ IN FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMMES

Jim Anderson, Ann Anderson and Harini Rajagopal

Although there is converging evidence that family literacy programmes enhance young children’s language and literacy learning and benefit their parents, they have been criticized on the grounds that they privilege the dominant language and fail to capitalize on families’ funds of knowledge. Responding to this criticism, educators have developed bilingual family literacy programmes. In this chapter, we first review the empirical literature on bilingual family literacy, revealing that such programmes positively contribute to young children’s early literacy learning while promoting families’ maintaining their home languages. Then, we report on a collaboratively developed family literacy programme called Parents As Literacy Supporters in Immigrant Communities that was implemented with more than 500 families from four linguistic groups in five communities in a metropolitan area of Canada. We conclude by discussing the implications of the research and raise lingering concerns and issues that need ongoing attention.

The fact that young children acquire considerable knowledge about literacy prior to schooling is now considered axiomatic by most educators and researchers. Ethnographic and socio-linguistic studies reveal that this principle generally holds across social and cultural groups (e.g. Anderson, 1994; Li, 2001; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). A key finding from this body of research is that families play an important mediating role in supporting early literacy development, even though they might be unaware that they are doing so (Taylor, 1983).

Drawing on the research from literacy-rich homes (e.g. Bissex, 1985; Taylor, 1983) in the 1980s and 1990s, educators began developing family literacy programmes that attempted to have participants emulate or replicate the literacy activities, events and practices, and the learning that occurred ‘naturally’ (e.g. Forrester, 1997) in these homes. However, these programmes were critiqued by Auerbach (1989) and others because of their deficit orientation
in that they: were aimed at low-income, minority, immigrant and refugee families; promoted
the dominant language (usually English) at the expense of the home languages of the fami-
lies; ignored the existing practices of the families while promoting school-like literacy
practices; and tended not to reflect families’ cultural knowledge or funds of knowledge (Moll
et al., 1992). The critiques by Auerbach and others had a sobering effect and many family
literacy programme developers and providers attempted to shift toward a strengths-based
orientation by promoting families’ home languages and their cultural capital – their funds
of knowledge.

The purpose of this chapter is to review critically the emerging literature on bi-lingual
family literacy programmes that promote first language maintenance while helping families
learn the dominant language of the community, as well as attempting to acknowledge and
build on their literacy practices as they expand their repertoires so that they can support their
children’s transition into school. We first present the framework that informs our work; then
review the literature on first language maintenance and loss; next, critically review the
emerging literature on bilingual family literacy programmes; share some of the findings from
our own work with immigrant and refugee families; and conclude with a discussion and the
implications of this work.

Framework

Informing our work is socio-historical theory developed by Vygotsky (1978) and subsequently
elaborated upon (e.g. Cole, 1997; Wertsch, 1998). Central to this theory is the notion that
learning is social as children learn to use cognitive tools, including language and literacy, in
the context of family and community. These tools are first used inter-psychologically with the
support and mediation of parents and significant others; then, support is gradually withdrawn
as children learn to use the tools intra-psychologically, or independently without the support
of others. However, Rogoff (2003) and other cultural psychologists have documented
considerable variation in how learning and development occur across socio-cultural contexts.
She points out the cultural nature of development, but reminds us that ‘to date, the study of
human development has been based largely on research and theory coming from middle class
communities in Europe and North America’ (p. 4).

We also draw on research in bilingualism, first language maintenance and language loss.
Cummins (2013) postulated the notion of common underlying proficiency proposing that
although there are obviously differences in the surface feature of one’s first language and an
additional language, interlinguistic resources or higher order analytic and cognitive abilities and
skills transfer across languages. He refers to additive bilingualism to describe the notion that
one can maintain one’s first language (L1) while acquiring a second language (L2) (Cummins
et al., 2006). Researchers have identified several benefits to maintaining one’s first or
home language. For example, Bialystok’s (2011) review illustrates that bilingual individuals
consistently outperform their monolingual counterparts on various tasks involving executive
control in the brain. She theorized that the effect of bilingualism on cognitive performance
exemplifies how everyday experiences accumulate to modify cognitive networks and abilities
across the lifespan. In their report to the National Reading Council, Snow et al. (1998)
concluded that children’s literacy success in a second language is enhanced if their first
language is well developed. Tabors and Snow (2001) cautioned against expecting and encour-
aging parents to interact with their children in English when it was not as well developed as
their first language.
Promoting first-language development

Related literature

Although a burgeoning research literature documents the potential effects of family literacy programmes (e.g. Anderson and Morrison, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Jordan et al., 2000; Phillips et al., 2006; Prins et al., 2009; Purcell-Gates et al., 2012), only recently have researchers begun to study bilingual family literacy programmes in immigrant, indigenous and refugee communities (Compton-Lilly et al., 2012). We review this emerging literature next.

While cast as an ‘English as a Second Language’ initiative with less emphasis placed on first language maintenance, Project FLAME (Shanahan et al., 1995) was one of the earliest programmes that attempted to build on families’ cultural and linguistic resources. FLAME was designed for Latino families with children aged three to nine in Chicago. Adults attended basic skills/ESL classes twice a week, and twice a month, they attended parents as teachers sessions where they learned about selecting and sharing appropriate books and magazines, teaching the letters of the alphabet/letter–sound relationships, and using games and songs with their children. Evaluation of the programme indicated that parents’ English proficiency improved and children’s knowledge of letter names and print concepts improved significantly, although the programme did not directly teach children. Although the goal of the programme was to increase parents’ and children’s proficiency in English, it should be noted that parents were also encouraged to read to their children in Spanish if they were more comfortable doing so and Spanish was the language of instruction.

Hirst et al. (2010) evaluated a bilingual preschool family literacy programme involving Pakistani-origin families of three-year old children in the UK. Teachers and a bilingual programme assistant visited the families every three weeks for a year. Each session focused on a particular aspect of early literacy development such as early writing, oral language or reading books with children. In addition to providing suggestions for supporting young children’s language and literacy development, the teachers and the bilingual assistants demonstrated respect for the cultural practices and language of the participants and, for example, provided bilingual picture books; encouraged families to use either English or their home language, Mirpuri Punjabi or Urdu, in the activities; and acknowledged and included the children’s experiences at the mosque school. The children participating in the programme and a randomly assigned control group were assessed using the Sheffield Early Literacy Development Profile (SELDP), which measures children’s knowledge of books, environmental print and writing, as well as letter recognition. Results indicated that the children in the programme made significant gains on the SELDP compared to the control group. As well, take-up and levels of participation in the programme were high. Parents were also interviewed about literacy practices in their homes and about their participation in the project. They viewed their experiences positively; believed that the programme had enhanced their children’s literacy development; appreciated more fully the family’s role in children’s literacy learning; and believed that the programme should be offered to all families with young children.

Working with Karen-speaking refugee families originally from Myanmar living in upstate New York in the United States, Singh et al. (2015) documented the literacy practices within a family literacy programme and a book-sharing programme. Typically, 10–12 families whose children ranged in age from a few months to five years attended weekly, one-and-a-half hour sessions in an intergenerational family literacy programme, ‘Storycircles’, for ten months. Instruction and directions were in English with simultaneous translation into Karen, the families’ home language. In the book-sharing programme – Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library Program – families were mailed a free, age-appropriate book each month (Conyer, 2012). Data
collection entailed participant observation of sessions where the researchers took field notes of the instruction and families’ engagement in the activities, transcription of interactions that occurred within the programme, and interviews with eight families and with the teachers. Because of the shortage of bilingual books and the parents’ limited facility in English, parents were unable to read the books to their children. However, the programme teacher taught the families how to do ‘picture walks’, essentially talking about the pictures in their home language, which according to Singh et al. helped families become familiar with sharing books with young children and early literacy pedagogy of American schools and its emphasis on shared book reading.

**Beyond shared book reading in family literacy programmes**

Although shared book reading with young children is a practice that is not shared by some cultural and social groups (Anderson et al., 2003; Boyce et al., 2010), it has become nearly synonymous with family literacy programmes (Anderson et al., 2007; Purcell-Gates, this volume). However, some programmes have expanded the repertoires of literacy activities that they promote. For example, Boyce et al. (2010) proposed that *storytelling* is a more universal phenomenon that families engage in *naturally* (Bruner, 1991). They reported on a study of the Storytelling for the Home Enrichment of Language and Literacy Skills (SHELLS) programme. Initially, the SHELLS programme encouraged families to share stories about their everyday experiences in their home language. Then, families were supported in making their own books based on these stories, eventually sharing these books so that children availed of the benefits of repeated readings and language expansion that written texts afford. From 75 three- and four-year-olds attending a Migrant Head Start programme in the United States, Boyce et al. randomly assigned 32 children and their families to the SHELLS programme while they continued to participate in the typical Head Start programme. The other 43 children continued with the Migrant Head Start programme only. The researchers assessed the total number of words children used, the number of different words used and mothers’ elicitation strategies during a shared narrative prior to and after the programme. Mothers in the SHELLS programme significantly increased their elicitation strategies compared with the mothers in the control group. Likewise, the children in the SHELLS programme significantly increased the total number of words used and the different words used in the shared narrative task compared to the control group.

Responding to calls for family literacy programmes to become more responsive to local contexts, Hope (2011) undertook an ethnographic study of family learning programmes for refugee families in two schools in South London to document whether or not families’ home language and their literacy knowledge and practices were acknowledged and incorporated. Data collection included observations, field notes and interviews, as well as questionnaires and records of attendance. Hope (2011) concluded that the activities and structure of the programme, while offering support, also offered little autonomy to parents and took little regard of refugees’ own literacies. The utilization of dual-language books, games or toys made by parents, home language and culture was outweighed by unidirectional transmission of school practices, and a course structure with no focus on social cohesion or connecting parents with each other. While the project strengthened relationships between staff and families at both sites, and participants displayed growing self-esteem in terms of personal development and skills, opportunities for involving families in course design and for empowering parents for the future were, from Hope’s perspective, not sufficiently developed. She emphasized the need for programme providers to understand and respond to the
specific strengths of immigrant and refugee parents, as well as the needs that they identify. She advocated for leveraging the families’ transcultural capital (Triandafyllidou, 2009) – their knowledge, skills and social networks from their home country.

Addressing the disconnection between home and school experienced by immigrant families, Iddings (2009) reported on a programme that reflected a more expansive notion of family literacy in an elementary school in the southwestern US. It included an informal Welcome Centre based on the theoretical underpinnings of ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992), creating a social and instructional space where recently immigrated families gathered to trade and share a variety of expertise and information, and gather information about their children’s education. Activities included exchanging oral narratives about families’ homelands, sharing recipes, discussing the linguistic features of Spanish and English, storytelling, creating picture books, and so forth. Iddings (2009) concluded that the participatory nature of the programme couched within participants’ knowledge and lived experience contributed to its success. She reiterated the need for schools to provide explicit spaces and planned programmes for newcomers in order to support them in using their home language and literacy practices, and to help them learn respectfully about these practices in their new community.

Some caution in bilingual family literacy programmes

In a study suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding of bilingual family literacy programmes, Zhang et al. (2010) reported on an initiative with Chinese immigrants in Canada. Forty-two preschool children and their families participated in the programme, at three community centres. The programme consisted of eight two-hour sessions conducted in Chinese and English each focusing on a topic such as oral language, reading Chinese and numeracy. Parents completed a questionnaire prior to commencing the programme to ascertain family demographics, home literacy environment, parents’ perceptions of their own and their children’s literacy abilities; kept a weekly log of literacy activities engaged in; and participated in a focus group at the completion of the programme. Children completed Chinese and English versions of the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EPT) and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT-III). Results indicated that although engagement in literacy activities on average increased across the eight weeks, it was not statistically significant. Pre- and post-test comparisons of children’s scores on the Chinese and English versions of the EPT indicated significant gains. However, pre- and post-test comparisons of scores on the Chinese and English versions of the PPVT-III indicated no significant differences. Zhang et al. disaggregated the data by community site and found that children from socially disadvantaged homes made fewer gains than children from more advantaged families. That children from poor families appeared to benefit less than their more socially advantaged peers from a family literacy programme that capitalized on home language is counter to the assumptions underlying socio-contextual perspectives of family literacy programmes (e.g. Auerbach, 1989), Zang et al. intimate.

As can be seen from the emerging literature on bilingual family literacy programmes, young children’s language and literacy learning are generally enhanced as they continue to use their first language. Adult family members also value these programmes and they begin to feel comfortable in schools and with Western curriculum and pedagogy. However, most of the studies to date have involved small numbers of participants, usually from a single language group, and have focused on either qualitative or quantitative data. We now turn to a three-year study of a bilingual family literacy project, Parents As Literacy Supporters in Immigrant Communities, that employed a mixed methods design and involved more than 500 families from four linguistic groups in five communities.
Parents As Literacy Supporters in immigrant communities

The Parents\textsuperscript{1} as Literacy Supporters (Anderson and Morrison, 2000) or PALS family literacy programme was developed as part of a multi-agency, community development project in an inner-city neighbourhood at the invitation of the mayor of Langley, a small city in the metropolitan area of Vancouver, Canada. The first author of this chapter and early childhood educator, Fiona Morrison, held focus groups with families, early childhood educators and community members, and drawing on their extensive backgrounds in working with families and the extant literature, they developed and piloted modules of the programme, refining them as necessary. PALS was then implemented in two community schools in Langley and the next year, other school districts, hearing about it through word of mouth, requested that the programme be offered in their district.

PALS is designed for the families of three- to five-year-old children and consists of 10–15 sessions, each about two hours’ duration, focusing on topics such as ‘learning to read’, ‘early mathematics’ and ‘learning and technology’. Some flexibility is built into the programme – for example, at the request of families who were concerned about the amount of television their children were watching, we developed a session, ‘Children and television’. Sessions are offered at a time and day convenient for the families; the programme has been offered first thing in the morning, over lunchtime and in the early evening. Sessions begin with the families and the programme facilitators – who are early childhood teachers – eating together, after which the teacher accompanies the children to a classroom while the parents and the facilitator meet for about half an hour to discuss the session planned for that day. For example, if the topic is early writing, parents are asked to share their memories of learning to write as well as their children’s drawing, scribbling and writing. The facilitator then reviews the key ideas about that day’s topic (e.g. that young children’s drawings and scribbling are their attempts to communicate and represent meaning and are important in their literacy development) and describes the age-appropriate activities that have been set up in five or six learning centres in the classroom. Parents then join the children where they and their children circulate through the various centres, engaging in the activities for about an hour after which the children go to recess and the facilitator and parents retreat for an informal, half-hour debriefing session over coffee or tea. The facilitator encourages the parents to share their impressions of, and give feedback on, the session: What worked? What didn’t? What did they observe about their children? What did the children learn? What did they learn? The children then rejoin this group and each family is provided with a high-quality children’s book and other resources, for example crayons, markers, paper and pencils for drawing and writing and counters, dice, playing cards and shapes for early mathematics, to take home.

The basic principles and structure of the PALS programme were retained in the Parents As Literacy Supporters in Immigrant Communities project but we also made modifications. First, because we would be working with different cultural and linguistic groups, we formed an advisory group of representatives from each community where we would be working. We also formed a working group including the facilitators from each site and the English as a Second Language programme coordinators from the districts in which we worked. We hired a cultural worker from each of the linguistic groups to be co-facilitators alongside the early childhood teachers in the programme. We then translated all of the materials into the four languages represented – Chinese, Farsi, Karen and Punjabi – and purchased high-quality, bilingual children’s books in each language.
Evaluation of PALS in immigrant communities

As described by Anderson et al. (2011), the study involved approximately 500 families representing the four different linguistic groups in five communities. We employed a mixed methods design that included: pre- and post-test comparisons of Normal Curve Equivalent Scores on the Test of Early Reading Ability–2 (Reid et al., 1989), a widely used norm-referenced instrument with fairly good psychometric properties designed to measure three- to eight-year-old children’s emergent literacy knowledge; pre- and post-test comparisons of the qualitative and quantitative components of the Parents Perceptions of Literacy Interview Schedule (Anderson, 1995); focus group sessions; audio recordings of the debriefing sessions; children’s literacy artifacts collected over a two-week period at home; and researchers’ field notes.2

Children’s literacy knowledge

Comparing the aggregated pre- and post-test Normal Curve Equivalent scores on the TERA–2, Anderson et al. (2011) found a significant increase in children’s literacy knowledge over time with an effect size of .318, which is considered large (Cohen, 1988). Although children’s NEC scores increased across all sites, at one site the growth was much more modest than at the other sites and not statistically significant. The reasons for this anomaly were not apparent from the data and may be attributable to measurement error.

Parents’ perceptions

In earlier research conducted with immigrant and refugee families in the same metropolitan area as the current study Anderson (1995) and Gunderson and Anderson (2003) found that parents held traditional beliefs about literacy learning, favouring rote memory, and drill and practice, and decrying learning through play and child-centred curriculum and pedagogy. However, the pre-test results of the PPLLIS indicated that parents in the current study held perceptions or beliefs consistent with an emergent literacy or holistic paradigm before they had participated in the programme. For example, on the open-ended question that asked parents ‘What are the five most important things you are doing to support your child learning to read and write’, the most frequent response across all five sites was ‘learning through play’, a perspective that was an anathema in the earlier studies with immigrant and refugee parents. Indeed, there were no significant differences in parents’ perceptions at the beginning of the programme and at the end, which we did not anticipate.

First-language maintenance

As noted earlier, we aimed to promote first-language maintenance and the notion of additive bilingualism, and in the focus group sessions we asked parents about this issue. In general, they were very supportive for various reasons. Some felt that their home language was an important part of their culture, their identity, and they wanted their children to know their cultural background and to identify with it. Others had pragmatic reasons, indicating that if their children maintained their first language and learned English, as bilinguals in an increasingly multi-lingual world, they would be advantaged in terms of employability when they became of working age. Some indicated it was important that children maintain their first language so that they could continue to communicate with grandparents and other
relatives, many of whom did not speak or understand English. And still others saw having two languages as a ‘good thing’ – a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991).

Notwithstanding their general overall support for L1 maintenance, parents at times experienced the tension of holding on to their own language while ensuring that their children learned English so that they could be successful in school and in their lives (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). For example, at one site, some of the parents feared that children’s English learning would be impacted if they continued to use their home language and so we provided them with accessible material on the benefits of home-language maintenance which allayed the concerns somewhat. Likewise, some of the families reported that their four- and five-year-olds were already expressing aversion to their home languages.

**Cultural ways of learning and teaching**

We also attempted to respect and honour the differing views of learning and teaching that the families held. Whereas from a Western perspective, verbal scaffolding is highly regarded and promoted, in some cultures children learn through more peripheral or guided participation (Rogoff, 2003). For example, we observed parents modelling an art activity for a child in a deliberate, demonstrative way and then hand the brush to the child, all without speaking. On other occasions, we observed the adults carefully guide the child in a hand-over-hand manner as she printed her name on a drawing she had done.

We worked diligently on developing rapport with families and earning and keeping their trust, and they felt comfortable in raising concerns. Occasionally, they expressed concerns with the pedagogical approaches we employed. For example, at one site, parents felt that we were not sufficiently explaining the purpose of the activities we introduced in the sessions and how they could continue these at home; we then provided them with a list of such activities and the key ideas, after each session. At another site, the families indicated that they saw little benefit of the session we called Riddles, Raps and Rhymes that focused on oral language and ways to encourage children’s phonemic awareness. Consequently, we adapted a more direct, didactic style explicitly explaining the role of rhyme and rhythm in children’s development and their facilitative role in children’s early literacy learning (Friedrich et al., 2014).

Although the results of the PALS in Immigrant Communities study were generally positive and the children and their families seemed to benefit, there are lingering issues. While the programme continues and has expanded to include other linguistic groups, its continuation is contingent upon securing yearly grants to fund it, a problem that is endemic to family literacy programmes generally. Fidelity to the structure of the programme is an issue and, for example, there is a tendency to truncate the debriefing segment of the programme where learning is consolidated and reinforced and where feedback from parents can be garnered and used formatively. We have also noticed that there is slippage in using the families’ first languages in print such as in messages home, in the agendas posted for each session, and so forth, and we have had to draw facilitators’ attention to these issues consistently.

**Discussion**

In this section, we present some cautions in interpreting the studies on bilingual family literacy programmes, affirm the potential of these programmes in supporting children’s language and literacy development and in maintaining their first language, and end with some
ongoing concerns. First, many of the studies involved relatively small numbers of participants from one homogeneous group. Second, the studies were short term and it is not known whether the gains in language and literacy that children accrued will be maintained. Furthermore, while some of the studies included comparison or control groups, others did not. Nevertheless, there is converging evidence of the benefits of bilingual family literacy programmes; in the remainder of the chapter, we discuss the findings and their implications. As well, several issues are evident and we address these.

One of the interesting findings is that young children’s early literacy learning in English is enhanced as they participate in bilingual family literacy programmes. Because of the benefits associated with first language maintenance (and bilingualism), the evidence suggests that children benefit from participating in early literacy activities and experiences in their home language and in English, accruing early literacy knowledge and skills regarded as foundational for literacy learning in school, which, of course, families strongly desire. This finding has implications for policy-makers, programme developers and providers and for families themselves.

Previous research suggests that many immigrant and refugee families tend not to promote their children’s retaining their home language – indeed, in some cases they deliberately eschew it – in the belief that it will negatively impact on learning English and therefore their success in school and in life (e.g. Wong-Fillmore, 1991). However, there is evidence that with encouragement, explanation and support, parents do see the value of their children maintaining their first language while learning a second and, for example, the parents in the PALS in Immigrant Communities study identified a number of pragmatic and social and cultural reasons for doing so. Given the cognitive, linguistic, social and psychological benefits of additive bilingualism, this finding is encouraging as it demonstrates a practical way of countering the pervasive, dominant-language-only ideology and the hegemonic positioning of English.

Although the results of most of the studies were positive, several issues also emerged. For example, ensuring that first languages are used as prominently as English in the programme is a challenge and programme providers will need to assume a reflective stance to ensure that the emphasis on both languages is maintained. As well, being able to leverage families’ transcultural capital (Hope, 2011) for their benefits is challenging. Indeed, even though we were able to adjust pedagogy to fit the cultural models of families as described, we believe that capitalizing on linguistic funds of knowledge is less difficult than is capitalizing on epistemologies and ways of learning and teaching. That is, seeing the value in another’s language is much easier than challenging taken-for-granted assumptions that our Western pedagogy is the way of supporting children’s learning and others are misinformed or wrong.

**Conclusion**

Although the literature on bilingual family literacy programmes is limited, we believe the results of the empirical studies we reviewed are hopeful in addressing the concerns raised by Auerbach and others about family literacy programmes not valuing home language and literacy, and essentially perpetuating home-language loss. However, more work needs to be done, including large-scale studies that include comparison groups, longitudinal work to ascertain the durability of the gains that children make in literacy achievement, and ethnographic work to document the particularities of programme delivery, so that these can be shared to inform programme development and implementation.
Notes
1 We quickly realized that other adults including grandparents, older siblings and other relatives accompany the children but because families and teachers had taken up using the PALS acronym, we retained it. We use 'parents' as a proxy for any adult who accompanies a child.
2 Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to report on the findings from all of these data. The complete report of the study is available at http://decoda.ca/wp-content/files_flutter/1314987684PALSinImmigrantCommunitiesResearchReport-Feb2011.pdf.

References
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