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Teaching and Learning about Family Literacy and Family Literacy Programs

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BOOK REVIEW

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TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT FAMILY LITERACY AND FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS

Jacqueline Lynch & Esther Prins (2020). *Teaching and learning about family literacy and family literacy programs*. London: Routledge. 232 pages.

Traditional thinking associates the acquisition of literacy skills with formal, primary school education; however, informal and unstructured family literacy programs promote a layered and organic opportunity to not only increase literacy competencies for children, but also provide enhanced opportunities for parents, families, schools, and communities. These programs support learning, strengthen and enhance the value of education and create a more connected and integrated community network. In addition to the benefits for children, the significance of these investments often extends to create an environment where parents and caregivers prosper from increased confidence, connections, and opportunities to expand their education and training (Swain et al., 2013).

Teaching and Learning About Family Literacy and Family Literacy Programs provides a valuable, comprehensive insight into family literacy practices and programs in the USA, UK and Canada. The scope of the text guides readers through literacy practices and acquisition in children while building on the principles of adult education through relevant social, cultural, and practical applications to support how family literacy practices provide a foundational structure that promotes literacy development in individuals, families, and communities.

Of particular significance, Lynch and Prins differentiate the importance of determining whether the goal of adult education is directed toward family literacy programs to improve language skills for the adult, or is focused on helping adults improve literacy skills as a means to scaffold the learning to benefit their children. These goals can exist as separate entities but the authors also suggest connecting intertwined goals for both child and parent. Programs such as Two-Generation (2Gen) concentrate on the understanding that parent education has a direct impact on learning for children in school and works to synthesize the delivery of adult and child learning simultaneously. In supporting varied approaches to family literacy programs, the authors provide examples of linking school personnel with families to support early literacy development and improve long-term outcomes for children who indicate early struggles with reading in grade one. Programs such as SPARK offer in-school tutoring, afterschool enrichment and family engagement to develop children's literacy skills and increase parental engagement. The authors further identify opportunities to increase access in common places such as libraries and through community-based programs. Improvement for adults who participate in family literacy programs extend well beyond further acquisition of literacy skills and include increased self-esteem, confidence,

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self-efficacy, and problem solving. These well researched and documented approaches support the understanding that family literacy programs must be reflective and responsive to individual, family and community needs.

Acknowledging the growing importance of digital literacy skills, the text advocates for enhanced and expanded integration of digital literacy approaches. Efforts to evolve digital literacy support should be purposeful and focused on addressing the practical challenges faced by diverse families. These approaches need to reflect a local and global framework to assess digital learning through the consideration of mental, material, skills, and usage access to fully understand inequalities within and between countries.

Family literacy practices and research began to emerge in the 1980's and early family literacy strategies were reflective of the white middle-class standard identified as the benchmark for family literacy needs. These ideals are an antiquated standard where the inclusion of a single multi-cultural text does not sufficiently represent the needs of multi-cultural learners and the diversity of race, ethnicity, and culture in communities. Educators and researchers need to reflect on their own lens and perceptions surrounding race, affirm racial identities of families, and collaborate with families in discussions about race and racism. The importance of incorporating an unbiased and broad understanding of learner needs by differentiating how race, ethnicity and culture are separate factors in family literacy but remain interconnected, and how these factors intertwine are important components in supporting family literacy in adult education. This approach encourages a deeper respect for culture by incorporating cultural practices into teaching, rather than viewing practices as static are an essential element in family literacy programs.

The scope of research in this text ensures many contributing factors that impact family literacy have been considered. The patriarchal position in the family unit plays an integral role in supporting families and children, yet Lynch and Prins astutely articulate the existing gaps and inequity in research and understanding of the father's role and engagement in family literacy programs. Existing data indicates there are differing types of engagement between paternal and maternal involvement in family literacy activities. Males appear to place more cognitive demands on children through asking questions about read texts and employ the use of more varied vocabulary and abstract words in discussions with children about what has been read. The literature identifies the need for family literacy opportunities in correctional facilities, particularly in relation to incarcerated males (who are disproportionately represented by African American and Latino families). One project in the UK had fathers record book readings on tape and send them home to their children. This approach supports family literacy but also promotes a focus on maintaining or rebuilding relationships and opportunities for these fathers to have a continued presence in their children's lives.

As an opportunity to continue the work, the research indicates future recommendations address reliable funding for family literacy programs. A caution to carefully assess adult learning outcomes for a narrow focus on accountability requirements that promote employability skills and post-secondary education and align with goals of stakeholders is also suggested. Increased documentation on family literacy programs focusing on anti-racist work, programs that support families with incarcerated members, expanded understanding of the role fathers, further research into family literacy strategies for same sex families, and the role extended family and community members play in family literacy is recommended. The authors also suggest increased research and documentation reflecting

family literacy efforts and programs in developing nations and lower income countries as an opportunity to improve both local and global family literacy programs. Further next steps not identified in the text and absent from much of the research could include an extension on the impact of adults with disabilities, family literacy strategies, and practices to support this section of the community.

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