

Early Literacy in Informal settings: Supporting Home Literacy Practices: Supporting Home Literacy Practices

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Abstract: Early literacy is a key factor in a child's development in the years before they start school. It often is used as one of the key indicators of a child's early development, and as shown in various longitudinal studies, it affects the way children progress through school and their later life. As the evidence of the benefits of early intervention accumulates, there needs to be more recognition of the place of early literacy within early intervention strategies in disadvantaged communities. A significant proportion of children, living in disadvantaged communities, and outside the formal early childhood system (pre-school, long day care or occasional care), start school with little exposure to any significant level or range of early literacy practices. This paper reports on a qualitative study with Aboriginal and CALD mothers and carers in an inner city part of Sydney, who attended mothers groups or supported playgroups. Taking a socio-cultural approach the study explores the views of front-line community workers and the experiences of mothers and carers with early literacy in a range of informal community based settings and programs. The research has implications for the development of strategies to support the development of programs in informal settings and the development of strategies to engage and support parents and carers.

Keywords: Early Literacy, Disadvantaged Communities

Introduction

THIS STUDY EXPLORED the early literacy practices of mothers and carers with pre-school aged children, living in relatively disadvantaged communities in an inner-city region of Sydney, who were accessing supported playgroups and mothers groups outside the formal early childhood system. Some 40% of children in Australia enter school without having attended formal pre-schools and Aboriginal and non-english speaking background families are over-represented in this statistic. The focus of this qualitative study with front line community workers, mothers and carers was on pre-school aged children in informal child-care settings - an area which continues to be a largely under-researched. It aimed to find out more about the gap that exists in the prior-to-school experiences for disadvantaged children who do not have access to formal preschools and childcare and as a result generally miss out on the systematic literacy support that is part of most quality early childhood programs. The mothers and children in this study were from two distinct linguistic and cultural groups: Aboriginal mothers and Chinese (including Vietnamese Chinese) mothers and carers. The key questions that guided this research were:

- what kinds of early literacy practices were the participating families aware of and involved in?
- how can families in relatively disadvantaged communities best be engaged and supported in developing their children's early literacy practices?

Theoretical Framework

By drawing on a socio-cultural approach (Street, 2005; Barton & Hamilton 2000), rather than a narrower skills approach (de Lemos 2002) we focused on early literacy as a set of practices located within particular social, economic and cultural settings. As Street (1995) implies in his definition of literacy as 'social literacies', the pathways by which literacy develops are varied and subject to the influences of culture, language background, and socio-economic status. For Barton & Hamilton (2000, p.7) literacy practices are 'a powerful way of conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape'. Makin's (2002) concept of a pedagogy of early literacy suggests that it is 'play based, community oriented, family friendly and responsive to children's interests and experiences' and accords with the views of researchers such as Heath (1983) and Comber (1994; 1998).

Home literacy practices can be defined as practices in the home that have a positive effect on the development of a set of emergent literacy skills of preschool children. These include: language abilities (both active and passive); letter identification; knowing the names and sounds of letters; phonological awareness and sensitivity; and conventions of print (CCCH 2004). Padak et al (2002) use the term family literacy in a manner that includes all the ways that parents and family members use literacy at home. They can be thought of as the 'set of oral, graphic and symbolic means by which family members exchange and retain information and meaning'. In this way home literacy is seen more broadly, involving three key forms – oral, graphic and symbolic. It also can include a dimension that Wasik (2004) sees as important, 'the intergenerational transfer of literacy to children', involving not just parents and grandparents, but other members of a family. This view can also be broadened out to include the local community, as well as cultural and socio-economic dimensions.

In this study we therefore focused on literacy practices that are about the ways 'that children learn culturally appropriate ways of using language and constructing meaning from texts in their early years at home' and their home literacy practices that are 'embedded within the social fabric of family life' (McCarthy, 2000).

Research Design and Methods

The project team, with the support of a multi-agency Steering Committee, carried out a small scale qualitative study with both Aboriginal and Chinese mothers with pre-school aged children, aged 18 months to 5 years, in informal early childhood settings. These settings were supported playgroups organised in local communities, with the specific aim of engaging and involving mothers with pre-school children to attend and take part in a range of social and early literacy activities (ARTD, 2008). The choice of supported playgroups and mothers groups as the sites of our study, reflected our concern with engaging with those mothers and children who were outside the formal early childhood education system and not accessing preschool or childcare programs. Supported playgroups have been one of the ways that

government funded programs in Australia used to reach and engage some of these mothers and children. Accessing these informal community settings enabled us to include mothers and carers who were among some of the ‘hard to reach’ families in these areas.

The research framework was based on an iterative process that aligned with the five stages of research identified by Carpecken (1996). These are: (1) building a primary record; (2) preliminary reconstructive analysis; (3) dialogical data generation; (4) analysis (5) second level analysis. From Stage 1, the researchers used ‘member checking’ (Carpecken 1996) to check the data with the perspectives of the key participants.

The methods used in gathering the research data included a literature review; a mapping stage; getting to know the groups; a series of group discussions and informal focused discussions and the observations relating to children and parent interactions in the playgroups. During the mapping stage we worked with one of our research partners to map and make contact with a range of early childhood and family services working with Aboriginal and Chinese families in the areas of the study. This was done through a series of interviews with selected front-line community workers in three inner city areas, which took place over a few weeks, mostly in their work setting, with a few carried out by phone.

This led to making contact and visiting a number of supported playgroups that were specifically focused on engaging either Aboriginal or Chinese mothers, carers and children. Five sites were selected for our study. Before carrying out the focus group discussions and informal focused discussions, we used a staged process over two months, where the researchers became familiar with each group, visiting the group a number of times, getting to know the group leader, the mothers and carers, explaining the aims of the research, before organising visits for the interviews and discussions with mothers and carers. After the interviews and informal focused discussions around a set of key questions were completed all the participants received an age appropriate book-pack for their youngest child, and each agency assisting the project received a small honorarium for their support of the study.

Number of Locations and Mothers

Aboriginal mothers Two supported playgroups for Aboriginal mothers were included with a total of thirteen Aboriginal mothers taking part in the study. One group was a young mothers group, with eight young mothers aged between 18 and 25 years taking part, with most in their early 20’s. According to the coordinator of the young mothers group, the literacy levels of the mothers in this group was quite low. Most had left school early, had not completed any high school certificate, and all lived nearby in public housing and relied on government benefits. Most had only one child, with three mums having two children and one was pregnant with her first child. The children’s ages ranged from ten months to five years.

At another site five Aboriginal mothers took part, aged from the mid 20’s to their mid 30’s, with a broader range of literacy and levels of education. While one mother said she was struggling with her own literacy, another mother was studying at university, and the rest of the mothers had completed high school and indicated they were reasonably comfortable reading to their children. The age range of their children coming to the group was from 18 months to 3 years, with a number having older children (one mother had three other school aged children and another had five other older children, none of whom lived with her).

Chinese mothers and carers A total of fifteen Chinese speaking mothers and carers were interviewed from three supported playgroups. The groups included, a Chinese mothers

playgroup and a multicultural playgroup with mostly Chinese mothers (referred to as *groups one and two*), and a Vietnamese-Chinese mothers' group (referred to as *group three*). All the participants were first generation immigrants, with most having been in Australia for less than ten years, and a few were recent arrivals. In the first two groups the mothers and carers came from Hong Kong, China and Taiwan. Most participants or their partners were engaged in paid work, either as professionals or in small business. The mothers ranged in age from mid twenties to late thirties, with the two carers aged in their sixties and seventies. There were no young (teenage) mothers in these groups. The level of education of the participants was varied, ranging from a professional woman with an undergraduate degree to an older carer who had little formal education.

In groups one and two all the mothers had at least a basic literacy in English, except for the older carers who spoke little English. Most mothers spoke Cantonese or Mandarin plus at least one dialect. Most lived in rented apartments nearby the group they attended, with only two of the group, including one of the carers, living outside the inner city. The families from China had only one child, and only one mother from Hong Kong had two children. A majority of the children attending these groups were aged under 2 – with nine children aged under 2 and four aged between 3 and 4 years of age.

In group three the mothers were ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and none were working. The Vietnamese Chinese mothers had been in Australia for at least five years and most lived in a nearby public housing estate. One was fluent in both Vietnamese and Cantonese, while the others in this group only spoke Vietnamese and a little Chinese. Their pre-school children were aged from 18 months to 4 years and a number had older children already at school.

Specific Findings

The data sources included transcripts of interviews with individuals; transcripts of the focus groups; notes and observations of the researchers relating to aspects of the mothers' and carers' interaction with their children. Note in two of the sites with the Chinese speaking mothers and carers an interpreter was used to assist with discussions and interviews. The data was analysed using a process of open coding and key theme analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The findings drawn from the data were checked with participants prior to final analysis, and as set out below represent the key themes that emerged from this analysis. Because of the small scale and qualitative nature of this research, in reporting on the data we use the terms 'most' and 'all'. Where 'most' is used, it denotes a response rate greater than 75% of the total group.

Aboriginal Mothers

Community workers and mothers generally acknowledged the importance of developing children's early literacy before they started school. Although among the *younger* Aboriginal mothers they were less sure about its importance in their lives and in how they could be involved in literacy activities with their children at home.

Most mothers talked about literacy activities in terms of books and reading books to their children. The regularity of such events was hard to judge, but seemed to be a regular part of the lives of only a proportion of mothers, mostly when their children were younger, and less so among the *younger* mothers.

Activities to do with text and reading books *at home* were the most challenging to support and encourage among mothers, especially for the *younger* mothers. Community workers pointed to the limited awareness of some mothers, especially the *younger* mothers, of the broad range of everyday literacy activities that they could engage in with their children.

Literacy activities were valued if they were provided for children as part of the activities within a playgroup. Where groups provided a storyteller or story time the children, the mothers and the Aboriginal workers all looked forward to the story time and were sorry when it was discontinued due to the lack of ongoing funding.

When asked most mothers said they *wanted* to be more involved in literacy activities with their children, but most mothers reported that the pressures of their home life *prevented* them from devoting as much time to reading with their children, especially when their children were younger, as they would have liked.

Most mothers said they engaged in singing songs, singing rhymes and telling stories to their younger children. Only a few *older* mothers said that telling Aboriginal stories was a part of their lives at home. They said it was usually more a part of their extended family life, involving older family members, grandparents, aunts or uncles in storytelling when the family got together. A number of mothers mentioned their children's love of drawing, the importance of children's television programs and identified some of the characters their children knew and loved watching on television.

Book programs, especially in disadvantaged communities, were valued as a way of getting hold of books. Both mothers and community workers placed high value on the availability of books for young children. Programs like the local *Booktalk program that distributed books free to mothers* and the provision of book-packs to mothers with young children were welcomed because they enabled mothers to access books they could not afford to buy. But many mothers, especially *younger* mothers, were unsure as to which books were appropriate for their child's age group. Also they could not afford to buy books, did not go to their local library, and mostly relied on accessing donated books through local programs like *Booktalk*.

There was a strong appreciation by most Aboriginal mothers of children's books that included Aboriginal themes and characters and a desire expressed by mothers, mainly *older* mothers, to see a stronger connection between their children and traditional Aboriginal culture.

Finally, all community workers identified the need for a consistent and ongoing early literacy program to support Aboriginal mothers to build on and extend their involvement in everyday literacy activities with their children. This included engagement with everyday text and reading, story telling, singing, music, drawing, and other graphic work and play. It was seen as crucial to further develop an early literacy program for informal settings that would reach, engage and maintain their involvement, including younger Aboriginal mothers, in programs that appealed to them and included ways of extending the mother-child interactions across a range of early literacy activities.

Personal contact, trust in a community worker, and the security of friends at the playgroup emerged as highly important factors affecting the engagement of Aboriginal mothers in programs and services, such as playgroups and mothers groups. The importance of workers being able to develop an ongoing relationship with younger mothers was highlighted. Developing a relationship over time and making personal contact were seen as two of the best ways of engaging mothers in a program or playgroup.

Among the effective strategies used by agencies to reach Aboriginal mothers were a mix of the following: becoming more aware of the make up of the local Aboriginal community;

contacting key Aboriginal organisations and other frontline workers in an area; getting known in the local community by door knocking, organising community meetings, and distributing flyers; and using local media like the local press and community radio to promote programs or activities.

According to community workers, literacy needed to be integrated into a broader program, and included in ways that were not too obvious or seemed like a course. With younger mothers especially, activities needed to be kept simple and easy to follow, preferably in short 10 to 15 minute segments, and, to include things that they were interested in and fun to do. Also younger Aboriginal mothers valued the range and flexibility of a service, and wanted to be able to drop in when possible and not feel like a stranger if they missed a number of weeks.

Chinese Mothers and Carers

The Chinese and Vietnamese Chinese mothers and carers in this study wanted their children to maintain *both* their home language and culture and to start to learn English in the years before they started school. Workers spoke about the high expectations that Chinese parents had of their children and the importance they placed on school education. This included the high value they placed on maintaining their home language and learning to start speaking and reading in English before they started school.

The Chinese mothers and carers at in groups one and two were engaged in a wide range of literacy practices that included involvement with texts, books, and reading to children, as well as songs and rhymes, and the mediated or unmediated use of video and multimedia in both the home language and English. The pressures on both partners to work, earn a living and to help establish their family here, also meant that mothers felt they were not able to devote as much time as they wanted to their children's needs.

The capacity to support the maintenance of the home language and the development of English varied considerably between the two areas in our study, with the mothers and carers in groups one and two being better placed than those in group three to access resources and provide support for the development of both languages. The Chinese mothers and carers in groups one and two were well aware of and able to access both Chinese and English language early literacy resources, accessing a range of sources, including local libraries, community centres, Chinese shops, and Chinese media.

Overall the Vietnamese Chinese mothers from group three were less aware and less able to access early literacy resources, despite their equally strong interest in maintaining their home language and supporting the development of English. Although a few mothers there felt that their children would learn English properly once they started school, and their main worry was about their home language.

Most Chinese mothers across all three groups reported feeling the pressure of trying to juggle their various responsibilities, within and outside the home, and concern that this would limit their ability to support the development of their children's early literacy, especially in their home language. Also mothers who married a partner from a non-Chinese background found it harder to maintain their own spoken language at home with their children, and were worried their children would not be able to either speak or write Chinese when they were older.

There was a high value placed on participation in playgroups or mothers groups by the Chinese mothers and carers in groups one and two, especially groups that had more structured activities to support their children to learn English – both spoken and written English. Having a Chinese or Vietnamese speaking worker run a group was seen as a very important factor in the engagement and participation by all the mothers and carers. A majority of mothers would welcome more support with the development of their children’s spoken English in the groups, through even more organised activities. They also wanted to know more about what were age appropriate books they should obtain for their children.

The Chinese mothers in groups one and two mentioned the importance of the support provided by their extended family or friends and the problems that arose when they did not have any relatives to rely on for help with their children. Family, friends and neighbours were often the source of information about early childhood and early literacy programs, activities, and resources. The mothers in group three said they had less extended family support to call on and depended more on friends and local information to gain support.

Community workers said they mainly relied on word of mouth in engaging mothers and carers in their programs. Also important was getting their agency and program known in the local community through, distributing flyers, placing ads, using local Chinese radio programs and attending regular community events such as Chinese New Year celebrations. In group three, the support of the Department of Housing, community agencies and their community noticeboards was also helpful in reaching mothers who lived in public housing.

Discussion

Our study has emphasised the importance of exploring and supporting the development of early literacy of pre-school aged children within a number of disadvantaged communities – especially among Aboriginal and Vietnamese Chinese communities. These children are among those who continue to be outside the formal early childhood system (pre-school and centre based childcare). In these communities they are less likely to access an early literacy program that supports their early literacy development or for the mothers to be encouraged and supported to undertake a range of early literacy activities at home. As a result, as longitudinal studies show, these children are more likely to start school with a disadvantage, and struggle with catching up in the development of their school literacy throughout their school years. The findings above provide important information about the literacy practices of the participating families and the kinds of strategies that are successful in engaging and supporting them. the broader implications of these findings are presented below.

The results of this study clearly indicate the need to recognise and encourage the development of a broad range of literacies in the home. Activities such as story telling, drawing, singing and dancing should be continually validated as contributing to the development of literacy and cultural identity. Some parents see literacy only in terms of reading books and ‘school readiness’. The study found that most of the participating parents and carers have an image of classroom based literacy activities and either attempt to mimic this in the home, or avoid this entirely because they feel that their own school experiences disqualify them. The results of this research point to a need for Heath and Comber’s work on the relationship between school based literacy development and family literacies to be taken up more systematically in early childhood education settings.

The findings also highlight the importance of language and culture to the participating families and indicate the need to value and encourage the maintenance of home language and culture. Most of the parents interviewed were unsure about the benefits of maintaining home language and culture but wanted to know more about this. This issue also emerged as a key engagement strategy for all the groups interviewed.

The results also emphasise the importance of have access to regular, ongoing early literacy activities in informal settings. The mothers, particularly *young mothers* wanted to know more about the ways in which they can contribute to the development of their children's literacy. Their experiences emphasised the need for ongoing early literacy activities in informal settings, particularly those that reflected their culture and local area.

Finally, the results of this study highlight the need for a more focused and consistent early literacy program in playgroups that provides evidence based support to the various groups in a region, as a way of building on and broadening the range of literacy practices in these groups, and encourage and strengthen home literacy practices. An important way to address the gaps in informal settings and improve the success of playgroups in early literacy is through the support of an early literacy program to provide systematic support to various groups across a region, in order to validate, build on and broaden the range of literacy practices, some of which mothers already undertake at home. Input and resources need to be sought from a wide range of stakeholders including agencies, community workers, schools and council librarians to develop a more consistent and sustainable approach to the development of early literacy in young children. Networks and contacts between community workers and schools need to be more effectively resourced and strengthened.

Conclusion

This report has covered a wide range of issues. Understanding the development of early literacy practices requires a broad understanding of the personal, social, economic and cultural challenges faced by some families. It emphasises the importance of reaching and engaging children and families from disadvantaged communities in informal settings with more focused and consistent early literacy programs and of supporting research within the informal settings. It is hoped that this research contributes to a better understanding of the strengths and vulnerabilities of families and the practices they undertake to be able to better develop the early literacies of their children.

The current research has underscored the fundamental importance of systematically supporting the development of early and emergent literacy of pre-school aged children in disadvantaged communities, especially among mothers and children who are *not* accessing formal early childhood services (pre-school or childcare). A logical consequence of this is the recognition that early literacy needs to be built into programs and services as an explicit, integrated part of the support for children and parents provided in informal early childhood settings.

The next phase of this research will hopefully see the investigation of culturally appropriate literacy programs within the context of informal play-group settings. There is an obvious gap in the provision of support for literacy development in children who do not have consistent access to formal pre-school programs. There is the need for a a more extensive research project that would investigate the impact of a consistent program of early literacy activities designed to foster and encourage the development of emergent literacy. Such a program

would take careful account of the role of the home language and culture in the development of literacies.

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