

# Family literacy in culturally diverse communities



Centre for  
Youth & Society  UVic

This literature review is focused on the identification of effective Family Literacy (FL) program characteristics in culturally diverse communities such as Canada.

## WHY THIS MATTERS

FL programs, given the parameters noted below, appear to positively impact children's acquisition of the literacy skills and strategies privileged in schools. Additionally, FL programs can provide adult participants with social and cultural capital.

## KEY POINTS

- ❑ Strength-based FL programs utilize socially and culturally responsive pedagogies that build knowledge of mainstream literacy practice on and through existing family-based literacy practices.
- ❑ Strength-based FL programs promote recognition of multiple ways of being literate.
- ❑ Strength-based FL programming is flexible in that the facilitators adapt pedagogical methods, materials, and content to reflect the cultural/social practices and goals of the families involved.
- ❑ To promote literacy development in children adult FL providers require exposure to explicitly taught mainstream literacy skills and strategies and understanding of how this knowledge can be integrated into existing FL practices.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ Historically FL programs were characterized as deficit-based and focused on static sets of literacy practices and skill-sets. Recent publications promote FL program designs that are strength-based, negotiated, and focused on social practices that are fluid and socially/culturally motivated.
- ❑ Literacies can be defined as “sets of social practices negotiated within local and global contexts” (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, and Lewis, 2012, p. 49).
- ❑ FL is defined as the ways in which families “use and support ... literacy in the activities and interactions of daily life” including “the many ways in which children and adults use and learn literacy within the naturally-occurring processes of daily family and community life” (Furness, 2012, pp. 1-2).
- ❑ FL practices are intimately tied to identity as they are embodied means through which thought, relationships, emotions, and values are expressed and understood.

“ ‘pedagogy involves the framing of selected text practices, genres and literacy event’ (Luke & Grieshaber, 2004, p. 6) in ways that differentially authorize and disqualify different literacy practices within the knowledge economies of schools ... Diverse linguistic capital is rarely framed or tapped into as valuable forms of literacy” (Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008).

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ Parental involvement appears to positively impact mainstream literacy acquisition of children if adults have received explicit modeling of mainstream literacy strategies/skills and consideration of how to integrate this knowledge into FL routines.
- ❑ FL programs that include explicit modeling of mainstream literacy strategies/skills and consideration of how to integrate them into FL routines appear to promote social/cultural capital for participating adults.
- ❑ There is an inadequate research base to determine if and how adult literacy levels are impacted by FL programs.
- ❑ Females are the most common participants in FL programs, yet in home situations children’s literacy development is impacted by both male and female family members.

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## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- ❑ Strength-based, culturally/socially responsive programs are time-intensive. Money to accommodate these practices should be built into funding proposals.
- ❑ Ongoing professional development for FL facilitators is critical and should be built into funding proposals.
- ❑ The least effective venue for recruiting FL program participants was schools as parents feared that they would be negatively profiled by school personnel if they admitted to being literacy-challenged.
- ❑ Word-of-mouth was the most effective means of recruiting new FL program participants. Therefore, programs may initially have to operate with fewer than ideal participant numbers until trust in new initiatives is established.
- ❑ To encourage male and female adult participation in FL programs recruiters must be attentive to the ways in which gender is portrayed on websites, in advertisements, and in the selection of facilitators.
- ❑ FL facilitators require ongoing professional development that equips them to be responsive to the diverse backgrounds and needs that exist in many FL endeavours.

