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Mothers' Beliefs About Literacy Development: Indigenous and Anglo-Australian Mothers From Different Educational Backgrounds

Research has shown a relationship between mothers' beliefs about literacy, their educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, and their children's emergent literacy awareness. Many Australian Indigenous children experience educational disadvantage, as do children whose parents are manual workers. One recommendation that is frequently made is for parents to be encouraged to participate in their children's literacy development. Yet little is known about the implicit beliefs about literacy held by mothers from Indigenous-Australian and Anglo-Australian backgrounds. Such beliefs need to be taken into account in early childhood literacy programs. Eleven Indigenous and nine Anglo-Australian mothers from varied educational backgrounds were interviewed about how children learn to read and literacy in general. The findings indicate that the tertiary educated mothers, whether Indigenous or Anglo-Australian, held views that were mostly compatible with an emergent literacy perspective. The early school-leaving mothers focused more on the role of memory and repetition of specific skills in learning to read. These findings have implications for teachers, researchers, and family literacy programs.

La recherche a démontré un lien entre les croyances d'une mère au sujet de la littératie, sa formation académique, son niveau socioéconomique, et la conscience imminente littéraire de ses enfants. Plusieurs enfants indigènes australiens sont défavorisés sur le plan éducatif, tout comme les enfants dont les parents sont des travailleurs manuels. On recommande souvent d'encourager les parents à participer au développement de l'alphabétisation de leurs enfants. Pourtant, on connaît mal les croyances implicites qu'ont les mères indigènes australiennes et les mères anglo-australiennes sur la littératie. Les programmes d'alphabétisation pour la petite enfance devraient tenir compte de ces croyances. Onze mères indigènes australiennes et neuf mères anglo-australiennes avec des formations académiques variées ont passé une entrevue portant sur l'apprentissage de la lecture par les enfants et sur la littératie en général. Les résultats indiquent que les mères avec une éducation post-secondaire, indigènes australiennes et anglo-australiennes, avaient des avis sur la littératie souvent assimilables à ceux de la perspective émergente du domaine. Les mères qui avaient quitté l'école plus tôt mettaient davantage d'importance sur le rôle de la mémoire et la répétition de compétences précises dans l'apprentissage de la lecture. Ces résultats ont d'importantes conséquences pour les enseignants, les chercheurs et les programmes familiaux d'alphabétisation.

Introduction

This study was designed to investigate the beliefs held by Anglo-Australian and Indigenous-Australian mothers about children's literacy development in relation to their own educational attainment. Currently in Australia, many Indigenous children and many children of manual workers do not experience the same success in schooling as the children of professional parents. A nation-

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al survey of the literacy achievements of children in grades 3 and 5 in all Australian states found that the highest-achieving 10% of children in year 3 were approximately five year levels ahead of the lowest achieving 10% of children in year 3 on a range of measures related to literacy proficiency (Masters & Forster, 1997). The children of professional and managerial parents were far more likely to meet the basic performance standards compared with the children of unskilled manual-working parents. Only one quarter of the Indigenous children met the basic performance standards at this level (Masters & Forster). Little has changed in the decade since that survey was undertaken, as "the proportion of Indigenous year 3 students achieving the benchmark level or better continues to be substantially below the proportion for non-Indigenous students" (Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2004, p. 6). This finding is supported by other research demonstrating that Indigenous children continue to experience educational disadvantage (Considine & Zappala, 2002; Windisch, Jenvey, & Drysdale, 2003).

It is now well established that literacy experiences during the preschool years are associated with subsequent reading achievement (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). During shared reading, for example, many children develop phonological awareness, sophisticated vocabulary, concepts about print, and knowledge of narrative structure before they start school (Clay, 1991; McGee & Richgels, 2003; Weizman & Snow, 2001). It is not simply the reading of stories per se, however, but the literacy-oriented conversations surrounding them that foster children's emergent literacy (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Snow, 1993; Watson, 2001). A mother's beliefs about what literacy is and how it is learned constitute an important part of her child's literacy environment and thus influence her child's literacy development (Brice Heath, 1983; Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000).

Many studies have found a relationship between parents' education, their beliefs about literacy, their own literacy practices, and their children's language and literacy development (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Bennett, Weigel, and Martin (2002) found a "relationship between parents' literacy-related beliefs and activities, affording opportunities to learn, and preschool children's language and literacy competencies" (p. 312). DeBaryshe (1995) explored the beliefs of 60 African-American mothers from a range of educational backgrounds and socioeconomic status using a Likert scale. She found that higher-educated mothers were more likely to believe that reading is enjoyable, that they were important teachers in their children's lives, and that a lack of time and resources should not necessarily impinge on shared reading with their children. The mothers who held these beliefs read more frequently to their children and conversed more with them during shared reading. The children of the mothers holding these beliefs showed greater interest in reading. Australian research by Considine and Zappala (2002) confirms the relationship between parental education and children's literacy outcomes, but does not refer specifically to parents' beliefs. Data from over 3,000 Australian students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds showed that parental educational attainment is a predictor of children's academic performance.

Research on parents' beliefs is relevant in the light of initiatives to enhance the achievement of Indigenous students in school. Parental participation and

involvement in their children's education is seen as a priority in Australian state and national documents. For example, the report of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2004) recommended that schools "provide opportunities for Indigenous parents and caregivers to develop skills to support their children's literacy acquisition and enhance their capacity to become active participants in their children's education" (p. 6). A national inquiry on reading pedagogy, initiated by the Minister for Education and prepared by an expert panel with some 453 submissions from a range of organizations, emphasized the important role of parents (not just Indigenous parents), especially in the years before starting school: "The Committee recommends that programs, guides and workshops be provided for parents and carers to support their children's literacy development. These should acknowledge and build on the language and literacy that children learn in their homes and communities" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 15).

One difficulty with such recommendations is that parents, and particularly Indigenous parents, tend to be treated as a homogeneous group with the same experiences, lifestyles, income, educational backgrounds, and attitudes (Clancy & Simpson, 2002; Dunn, 1999; Fasoli & Ford, 2001; Grant, 2001). Little research has explored variation in the beliefs of Australian parents from a range of social and cultural backgrounds. One of the few studies on parents' literacy beliefs, by Nichols (2002), focused on the memories and literacy practices of 56 middle-class non-Indigenous parents. Her findings related to the construction of discourses surrounding literacy and gender, rather than on the nature of parental beliefs about literacy. Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington, and Richer (1999) surveyed teachers and Indigenous parents in 22 Australian primary and secondary schools in diverse locations. They were interested in exploring what factors facilitated parents participating in their child's schooling. Dunn (1999) investigated Aboriginal children's literacy development using both quantitative and qualitative methods over a period of 18 months, from preschool to kindergarten. She concluded that "a major determinant of literacy competence was the effect of parental values in relation to literacy" (p. 114).

Many North American studies on parental beliefs about literacy have recognized a contrast between two general orientations: an emergent literacy orientation and a skills-based orientation (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro, 2006). An emergent literacy orientation encompasses a cluster of beliefs that may be seen as child-centered. Adults holding these beliefs regard literacy as enjoyable, entertaining, and embedded in everyday life. They believe that children learn literacy through play, exploration, and shared reading. They enjoy visits to the library and regard themselves as teachers of their children. This orientation has been associated with middle-income and high socioeconomic status families (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Brice Heath, 1983; DeBaryshe, 1995; DeBaryshe, Binder, & Buell, 2000; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Korat & Levin, 2001; Weigel et al., 2006).

A skills-based orientation, on the other hand, encompasses a cluster of beliefs that focus on literacy development as the acquisition of a set of distinct skills that are acquired through direct instruction, using workbooks, stencils,

flash cards, and drills. Teachers, rather than parents, are seen as holding key responsibility for children's literacy development. Children are taught to listen quietly during shared reading. There are strong boundaries between literacy and other activities, and reading is seen as a preparation for school. There is an emphasis on the rote learning of letters and numbers. This approach has been associated with families who have low levels of education and low income (Baker et al, 1997; Brice Heath, 1983; Fitzgerald et al., 1991; Goldenberg, 2001; Sonnenshein et al., 2000; Weigel et al., 2006).

As noted above, many programs seek and encourage parental involvement, and this is almost universally accepted as an effective practice, especially with families perceived to be disadvantaged. If parents are being asked to engage in practices that contradict their implicit beliefs about how literacy is learned, however, the consequences may be counterproductive. Janes and Kermani (2001) found that attempts to "train" Latino parents to engage in enjoyable interactions with their children during shared reading led to the whole process being regarded as punitive. DeBaryshe and Binder (1994) point out that "Since parental beliefs are closely related to parental actions, educators who wish to solicit parental involvement in language and literacy stimulation must consider the beliefs that parents hold" (p. 1310).

To summarize, this study has been designed to explore the beliefs that Australian mothers hold about young children's literacy development. It is set against a backdrop of educational disadvantage for Australian children from Indigenous and low socioeconomic backgrounds and a taken-for-granted policy of encouraging all parents to become involved in their children's literacy development. Specifically, this study has the following aims.

- To analyze how mothers from Anglo-Australian and Indigenous-Australian backgrounds talk about children's emergent literacy development;
- To explore the efficacy of using discourse analysis of the mothers' talk as a tool for accessing their beliefs about literacy development;
- To determine whether the mothers' beliefs about literacy development intersect with their educational attainment and/or their cultural background (Indigenous-Australian versus Anglo-Australian);
- To provide early childhood educators with knowledge about how parents' beliefs about literacy development will affect how the parents participate in early literacy education.

Methodology

Twenty mothers of preschool-aged children were interviewed about their home literacy practices and beliefs as part of a larger study of shared reading of picture books with 3-4-year-old children. The mothers were contacted via the directors of several preschools, who agreed to serve as gatekeepers by inviting mothers to participate in the study. I then contacted the mothers and obtained full consent as required by the university ethics committee. The mothers were asked to audiorecord themselves reading to their child three picture books that I provided and to include all the conversations that took place during the shared readings.

In order to contextualize the findings as much as possible, the mothers were then interviewed in their homes about their experiences in reading to their

children, including whether they enjoyed the picture book texts and what the experience meant to their children. They were invited to share their own early experiences of stories and reading and to explain their views on how children learn to read. The interview questions are set out in the Appendix. These questions served as a guide only, however, as it was important for the interviewer to be free to establish a rapport with the participating mothers and to allow them to express their views in an open-ended way. Technical terms like *socio-dramatic play* were recast in commonsense terms as appropriate when discussing this aspect of their children's engagement with literary texts.

The sample size was determined by the mothers themselves. All mothers who expressed interest were included. One research assistant, a qualified early childhood teacher with 18 years classroom experience, conducted all the interviews. This person had served as a university lecturer and literacy consultant.

The mothers differed in terms of their educational background, as six mothers had tertiary qualifications of at least an undergraduate university degree, and 14 mothers had left school on or before the age of 16. Eleven mothers were Indigenous Australians, and nine were Anglo-Australian. All had at least one child aged between 3 years 1 month and 4 years 11 months and spoke English as their only language. Table 1 shows the distribution of mothers in the sample, and Table 2 gives details about the participating mothers.

Methods of Analysis

The mothers' responses to the two questions were transcribed, divided into clauses (self-contained semantic units with a verb as their nucleus), and then each clause was analyzed grammatically according to the systemic functional framework (Halliday, 1994). Two questions were particularly relevant to the aims of this article: How do you think children learn to read? and Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your ideas and beliefs and attitudes toward literacy, either for yourself or your child, or just in general?

Two methods were used to analyze the participants' responses. The responses to the first question were analyzed using discourse analysis methods, and the responses to the second question were analyzed using the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By using both analytical methods it was possible to explore the participants' responses from a variety of perspectives (Roulston, 2001). I discuss each method in turn.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is based on a view of language as a socially constructed representation of reality (Florio-Ruane & Morrell, 2004; Roulston, 2001; Wooffitt, 2005). As Wooffitt notes, discourse analysis assumes that "the language we use, and the way we use it, is not determined by, nor anchored in, some set of

Table 1
Distribution of Mothers in the Participant Sample

	Indigenous Australian	*Anglo-Australian*
Tertiary educated	2	4
Early school-leaving	9	5

Table 2
Information About Participating Mothers

Mother	Ethnicity	Highest Educational Attainment
Nicole	Indigenous Australian	Tertiary
Toni	Indigenous Australian	Tertiary
Kerry	Anglo-Australian	Tertiary
Denise	Anglo-Australian	Tertiary
Antonia	Anglo-Australian	Tertiary
Sally	Anglo Australian	Tertiary
Lyla	Indigenous Australian	Age 14 years
Kath	Indigenous Australian	Age 16 years
Roslyn	Indigenous Australian	Age 15 years
Sheila	Indigenous Australian	Age 14.5 years
Lynne	Indigenous Australian	Age 16 years
Jenny	Indigenous Australian	Age 16 years
Amanda	Indigenous Australian	Age 15 years
Veronica	Indigenous Australian	Age 15 years
Maree	Indigenous Australian	Age 15 years
Adrienne	Anglo-Australian	> 16 years
Gillian	Anglo-Australian	> 16 years
Candace	Anglo-Australian	> 16 years
Janet	Anglo-Australian	> 16 years
Dianne	Anglo-Australian	> 16 years

objective properties of the events to which we refer" (p. 67). In this study, the participants' responses were analyzed using a form of discourse analysis based on Halliday's (1994) systemic-functional linguistic theory. According to this theory, how people use language both reflects and shapes their world view. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), "language provides a theory of human experience, and certain of the resources of the lexicogrammar of every language are dedicated to that function" (p. 29).

This theory enables researchers to analyze the covert patterning of language, in this case to access the mothers' implicit attitudes and beliefs about literacy within their more explicit expressions of their beliefs. This study focused on the experiential function of language, that is, the function that language serves as a resource for construing and making sense of the world we experience. When analyzing experiential meanings in the grammar, the main distinctions exist in the choice of verb. Verbs in English are distinguished according to the types of experience they encode and the grammatical patterns they typically adopt. There are six types of verbs.

Material verbs express actions and events in the external world (e.g., *going, buying, writing, cleaning*).

Mental verbs express feelings, thoughts, and perceptions and are of three types: cognitive verbs, for example, *thinking, knowing, learning*, and *deciding*; affective verbs, for example, *liking, loving*, and *hating*; and perceptive verbs, for example, *seeing* and *hearing.*

Relational verbs are used to classify and identify the phenomena we experience (e.g., *x **is** y*, *x **has** y*).

Verbal verbs express symbolic meanings through words and language (e.g., *saying, telling, asking*).

Behavioral verbs refer to behaviors that are external expressions of inner workings (e.g., *watching, looking, crying*).

Existential verbs are used simply to describe the fact that something exists (e.g., there *is* the bird).

Whenever a person talks about something, he or she makes choices from this range of process types to express what he or she wishes to say. Each choice made reflects the person's attitude toward the experience, the people involved, and the circumstances under which it occurred. In talking about how children learn to read, speakers can choose to construct the child in a number of ways, for example:

- the child as a person engaging in individual cognition and thought by using mental verbs, particularly those expressing cognitive processes (e.g., *he knows the sounds*);
- the child as one experiencing emotion and making subjective choices by using mental (affective) verbs (e.g., *he loves to read*);
- the child as one who perceives phenomena using mental (perception) verbs (e.g., *they see the words and pictures*);
- the child as an actor using material verbs with some effect on the world around him or her (e.g., *turning the pages* or *going to school*). This is quite a different view of the child as a learner: rather than learning to read through cognition or desire, the child is constructed as learning to read by doing.

In the following section I describe the method of analysis and the findings for each question separately and discuss the implications for educators.

Mothers' Beliefs about Children's Reading Development

In this section I analyze mothers' responses to the question: How do you think children learn to read? The clauses were collated into spreadsheets so that they could be sorted according to verb (process) type, as shown in Table 3.

The analysis so far showed the type of processes the mothers used when talking about how children become readers (i.e., whether they construe learning to reading in their talk as a mental, material, or behavioral process or a combination of these). This provided only a partial understanding of the mothers' perspectives, however, as it is also necessary to analyze who is engaging in these processes. In other words, who, according to the mothers, is the main participant, or the doer, of the processes involved in learning to read, the mother or other adult, or the child.

In order to analyze this, the clauses were further coded according to whether the main participant (Actor, Senser, Behaver, etc.) was a child or a

Table 3

Examples of Mental Process Verbs in a Spreadsheet Sorted by Process Type

Clause	Conjunction	Senser	Verb	Phenomenon	Circumstance
She5	and then	she	learns	the words	slowly
She7	so	she	learns		from pictures

parent. This resulted in two sets of spreadsheets, one in which the child was the main participant in the clause, and one in which the parent was the main participant in the clause. From there the results were divided according to speaker so that there was a set of clauses for each of the four groups of mothers: tertiary qualified Indigenous Australian, tertiary qualified Anglo-Australian, early school-leaving Indigenous Australian, and early school-leaving Anglo-Australian.

From these four sets of analyzed clauses, I distilled out the mothers' beliefs about children's literacy development, as reflected in the experiential grammatical choices they made. Each semantically distinct response was recorded only once in a list, even if several mothers said the same thing, for example, *children learn by looking at the pictures.* An example of this distillation is provided in Figure 1. In this way it was possible to compile a representative list of the main ideas about literacy that the mothers were reporting in the interviews and an overall picture of how they were constructing both the child's role and their own role in the development of literacy.

Findings

Mothers' Construction of the Role of the Child in Learning to Read

Table 4 shows the mothers' responses to the question: How do you think children learn to read? This table is organized such that one can see at a glance

Behavioural Processes

Clause	Conj	Behaver	Process	Range
Ros91	so	she	ll look	at it
Lyn1	from		looking	at pictures
Ros89	so	she	ll look	at the picture
Ros3	and	they	look	at the pictures
Can5		They	look	at the pictures
Dia11	if	they	look	at the pictures
Dia7			looking	at the pictures
She3		she	looks	at the pictures
Gil4	as	he	s looking	at the pictures
She12	so	he	looked	at the pictures [of the little toy train]
Dia2		they	look	at the pictures more than the words
Jen6	and	she	looked	the the pictures and that

Mental Processes

Clause	Conj	Senser	Process	Phenom	Circ
Ros62	and	^she	^was loving	[[listening to these stories]]	
Kath4	and	they	can recognize	that letter	from a sight word
Gil2	but	Lewis	likes	[[having books read to him]]	
Jen4	and	she	memorises	the stories	

Children's own role in learning to read includes:
  looking at the pictures
  liking/loving listening to stories
  recognizing letters and words

Figure 1. Example of distillation of responses.

Table 4
Mothers' Construction of the Child's Role in Learning to Read

Tertiary Educated Mothers: Anglo-Australian and Indigenous	*Early School-Leaving Mothers: Anglo Australian*	*Early School-Leaving Mothers Indigenous*
learning words by sight loving being read to	memorizing words liking being read to	learning/recognizing words loving listening to stories
listening to stories developing in age liking/loving books being interested in books/ learning to read possessing books		listening to stories developing in age liking/loving books being interested in books/in the story having books of their own
	looking at the pictures seeing words repeatedly seeing words and pictures together knowing what the story is about (from pictures) making up stories	looking at the pictures seeing words repeatedly seeing words and pictures together knowing how the story goes making their own stories, telling stories from the pictures
putting letters and sounds together being taught at school being able to write their name wanting to read seeing value in books/ reading wanting to know/learn	incorporating what they've heard into their retelling of the story having a good memory having people help them with reading	sitting down to read together pointing to the words asking to be read to memorizing stories sounding out words spelling out words reading out words having favorite books

which responses were given by which groups of mothers to describe the child's role in learning to read. The statements in Table 4 are examples of the mothers' actual words from the interviews.

Remember that reporting the absence of an idea by any group does not necessarily imply that members of that group do not engage in a particular practice such as visiting the library or talking with the child's teacher. It is important that when asked to say how they think children learn to read, these mothers have foregrounded particular practices by talking about them and so have constructed the role of children and parents in children's literacy development in this particular way.

An important first finding was that the tertiary educated mothers, both Indigenous and Anglo-Australian, shared so many views in common that they were conflated into a single category. This is significant as Indigenous parents are frequently represented as a homogeneous group experiencing educational disadvantage. This finding suggests that in terms of their beliefs about literacy, tertiary education is more relevant than ethnicity in shaping attitudes and values.

Although the question asked about reading development, many of the mothers referred to writing as well, particularly spelling, suggesting that they were thinking in terms of general literacy skills.

Each section in Table 4 is separated by a bold line. For example, it can be seen that all mothers, regardless of cultural and educational background, believed that learning to read involved learning or memorizing words and enjoying hearing stories. In contrast, *only* the early school-leaving mothers, both Indigenous and Anglo-Australian, stated that *looking at the pictures* was a way children learn to read. Please note that in this section I am discussing only clauses where the child is encoded as the subject or doer of the verb. The following is a summary of the findings from this part of the study.

Beliefs Shared by All Groups of Mothers

All the mothers shared the fundamental insight that in order to learn to read, children must like or love being read to in order to learn, memorize, or recognize words. The mothers conceptualized learning to read as a mental process that has both cognitive and affective elements.

> Amanda (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): I think it's extremely important the kids like reading, rather than just being forced to do it.
> Antonia (Tertiary educated Anglo mother): I think being read to more than anything … and then they get an interest in it and then they really want to learn how to read.

One subtle difference is discernible in the degree of intensity seen as essential for reading development. The Anglo-Australian early school-leaving mothers used the term *liking*, whereas the tertiary educated and Indigenous early school-leaving mothers used the term *loving* to categorize the nature of the affect involved in listening to stories.

Beliefs Shared by the Tertiary Educated Mothers and the Early School-Leaving Indigenous Mothers

The tertiary educated mothers and the Indigenous early school-leaving mothers both noted a maturational factor involved in learning to read, as evidenced by their use of the behavioral process *developing in age*.

> Toni (Tertiary educated Indigenous mother): I think you have to get it (i.e., become a reader) before the age of 7, if it's going to happen.
> Denise (Tertiary educated Anglo mother): Well it just sort of comes if they've had enough, you know, exposure to it. I don't know the mechanics of it but it just sort of happens.

These two groups also shared the view that interest in, and ownership of, books was important for children to learn to read.

Beliefs Shared by Both Groups of Early School-Leaving Mothers

Both groups of early school-leaving mothers characterized learning to read using the mental verb of perception *seeing* and the behavioral verb *looking*. When the child knows the story, he or she is then able to make up the story from the pictures.

> Roslyn (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): I think they learn mostly by looking at the pictures first and they look at the picture and tell the story from the actual picture.

> Sheila (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): She (child) looks at the pictures and makes her own story and then slowly she learns the words and puts them right. So she learns from pictures.
> Adrienne (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): Repetition. Like seeing the same words over and over.
> Candace (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): Through seeing the word and the pictures.
> Gillian (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): Lewis likes having books read to him and he also makes up stories himself as he's looking at the pictures and he has a good memory as well, so he incorporates what he's heard in his relating the story.

None of the tertiary educated mothers referred to these perceptual processes such as seeing, looking, and so forth as playing a role in learning to read.

Beliefs That were Different for Each Group of Mothers
The final section of Table 4 shows the responses that were unique to each group of mothers.

The tertiary educated mothers. These mothers referred to children learning to put letters and sounds together (phonemic awareness skills) and being able to write their name (the alphabetic principle), indicating an awareness of the functional uses of literacy as well as a personal identification with literacy. The role of formal schooling was affirmed. The tertiary educated mothers also cited the importance of children wanting to learn to read and developing positive attitudes toward reading. Implicit in these statements is the view that learning to read involves the development of a sense of oneself as a literate person (Sonnenshein et al., 2000).

> Nicole (Tertiary educated Indigenous mother): A combination I guess of being read to, just watching somebody go through print and things like that.… Lots of books, experiences, taking them to libraries, lots of print around.
> Kerry (Tertiary educated Anglo mother): Basically it's a matter of learning the letters and then the sounds and starting to put them together. I think that's the fundamental thing and later on they get some words by sight. Cause I'm starting to see that happening with Karen.

The Anglo-Australian early school-leaving mothers. These mothers made frequent reference to the importance of memory in children learning to read.

> Janet (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): My daughter, actually she was having a bit of trouble in kindergarten reading and her teacher said to me, "it's memory." And I really thought about it and I thought well, it is. You remember what a word says, so yeah, I think that it's just memory.… And sounding it out and memories what a word says.

These mothers also referred to the need for children to be helped with their reading. There was no mention of positive affect.

The Indigenous early school-leaving mothers. These mothers listed a range of skills to be acquired: sounding out, spelling, pointing to words, learning by rote. The reference to favorite books implies a value in returning many times to familiar texts. Examples follow.

> Lynne (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): From looking at pictures and associating words with pictures, a lot from memory, seeing the same word,

pointing to the word, saying it over and over again.
Jenny (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): Just recognizing words.
Taniesha recognizes a lot of words now and she memorized the stories.

Mothers' Construction of the Role of the Adult in Children Learning to Read

Above I analyze the beliefs held by the mothers about the role of the child in learning to read. I now look more closely at those clauses where the mother or other adult was seen as playing a role in the literacy development of the child. The mothers' beliefs about the role of parents were accessed in the same way as those about the role of the child. There were fewer clauses where the parent was the main participant, so the three groups of mothers were further conflated according to educational attainment alone (tertiary educated or early school-leaving).

Both groups of mothers said that the way that parents can assist their children is by reading together with their children and encouraging their children to read.

Lyla (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): By making them interested in it, encouraging them to get interested in books.
Amanda (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): They've got to actually want some interest in it, so you make sure you get what they're interested in, rather than what you're interested in.
Maree (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): You've got to just encourage them all the time. Encourage them to read, 'cause reading, that's how they learn to spell and everything by reading, they seen that word all the time, yeah.

The tertiary educated mothers, but none of the early school-leaving mothers, said that adults assist their children's literacy development by enjoying reading time with their children, wanting their children to read and enjoy reading, going to the library with their child, persisting with reading, and sounding out words for their child.

Sally (Tertiary educated Anglo-Australian mother): I read stories because I enjoy them, and I know they like them. It's something that gives us pleasure … We sound things out if he wants to know. We do that … but I don't do it for an activity to teach him anything, I do it because we enjoy to do it.… My goal is for them to have pleasure.

The early school-leaving mothers, but none of the tertiary educated mothers, said that parents could assist their children's literacy development by meeting and talking with their child's teacher, being aware of their child's literacy and any problems, and putting on tapes, CD games, playing games, and so forth.

For the early school-leaving mothers, both Indigenous and Anglo-Australian, the child's teacher was referred to as having the primary responsibility for children's literacy development.

Gillian (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): You get taught at school how to read.
Roslyn (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): The most important thing is to go to school to learn to read.
Roslyn: Parents have a lot to do with it. They come up and tell teachers if there's a problem.

These statements suggest that the mothers consider themselves as a secondary source of support and that teachers are the experts and are responsible for teaching.

Mothers' Beliefs about Literacy in General

In this section I summarize the mothers' responses to the question: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your ideas and beliefs and attitudes toward literacy, either for yourself or your child, or just in general?

Overall, this question generated considerable discussion about a range of issues. The responses were initially divided into clauses as described above. Unlike the discourse analysis, however, the collated responses were analyzed using constant comparison methods in order to identify any common threads or themes, and a set of criteria was then developed as a way of categorizing the main beliefs and attitudes of these mothers about literacy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These findings complement those discussed in the above sections. The following four themes emerged from the data.

• The importance of being literate;
• The disadvantages of being illiterate;
• Problems associated with parents' lack of literacy skills; and
• Changes that should be made to how literacy is taught in schools.

As for the former question, some views were were shared by all mothers, and some were different. I take each theme in turn and provide some representative examples of the mothers' statements.

The Importance of Being Literate

This view was expressed by many of the mothers from a range of educational backgrounds, for example,

> Adrienne (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): I think it's important, 'cause when they can do it, it opens the world.
> Janet (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): It's very important to read.… It was always a major part of my mum saying to me you know, it's "you have to learn to read."
> Toni (Tertiary educated Indigenous mother): It's really important. Some books from Indigenous cultures are important to read.
> Antonia (Tertiary educated Anglo mother): Well, I think if you can read you can conquer the world, really. It's for poor, rich people, it just gives, opens so many doors.

Other responses from the tertiary educated mothers in this section, however, suggest a greater experience of the benefits of literacy.

The Disadvantages of Being Illiterate

The focus here was on the severe limitations experienced by people who cannot read effectively, for example,

> Adrienne (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): You hear so much about literacy. Yeah, people that go through not being able to read. I don't know how they'd cope. I don't know how would you get by not reading.
> Candace (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): You know, it's very hard when you get like documents that you can't even read and know how to spell out. My girls, they, my 23-year-old, see, she went right the way through to year 12 and that, so … mind you, they pick me up on my spelling. They pick me up on

my reading.

Janet (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): It's only been in the last 10 years that he [husband] has been able to read. He could only ever write his name and his address.… I can't see how he got through life without learning, knowing how to read.

Problems Associated with Parents' Lack of Literacy Skills

This theme was raised only by the early school-leaving mothers. A palpable sadness and sense of lost opportunities was evident in these responses.

Lynne (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): I think with Aboriginal families that a lot of us weren't bought up with a lot of reading in the home. Um, our parents had problems in school. Our parents never got the opportunity to go to high school. They were unable to do homework with us, and it just wasn't part of the routine. As mothers now, I think we're carrying that on, so it's like learning a new life-style, to be able to do that with the children.

Candace (Early school-leaving Anglo mother): I just hope I spend more time on my kids with their reading than my parents did with us.

Changes That Should be Made to How Literacy is Taught in Schools

Many of the speakers, especially the Indigenous early school-leaving mothers, took the opportunity to voice their dissatisfaction with various aspects of how reading and writing are taught in schools. In some of these responses it is clear that the mothers preferred a skills-based didactic approach to reading instruction for their children. But the need for enjoyment, interest, and engagement was also reiterated.

Kath (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): They get told to write it how it sounds and they don't be corrected, and sometimes it's a totally different sound from how it's written. I find that's very confusing for kids.… Personally I don't like it, the child should be stopped there and then, and corrected, because that was why we weren't bad spellers when we were young, we were stopped and corrected constantly.

Maree (Early school-leaving Indigenous mother): They [schools] should have programs for parents like where they can learn. I think like schools should have programs for the parents … you know, so that parents can get back into it too. 'Cause if you don't know, how are you going to help your kids?

Discussion

Although each family is distinct, with its own shared history and personal idiosyncrasies, some common patterns emerged from the mothers' talk. The discussions about literacy and how it is learned by young children were closely aligned with more general values and attitudes about learning and the role of school, home, and family.

The tertiary educated Indigenous and Anglo-Australian mothers shared so many beliefs and attitudes about literacy development that they were indistinguishable in this study. Perhaps because these professional women have experienced literacy success, they are confident about their own abilities and therefore their capacity to foster literacy in their children. Their beliefs are mostly compatible with the emergent literacy perspective described in the introduction (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson & Shapiro, 2006). Their focus on children's enjoyment, pleasure, and motivation, combined with their own pas-

sion for reading, will almost certainly influence their children's desire to "appropriate" literacy, as defined by Sonnenschein et al. (2000). "Appropriation involves cognitive, social, and motivational dimensions, consistent with a perspective on reading that emphasizes engagement" (p. 107). This also makes clear that Indigenous mothers do not constitute a homogeneous group.

The early school-leaving Indigenous and Anglo-Australian mothers spoke more about the difficulties in learning to read. They were perhaps less confident of their own literacy skills and were more conscious of the central role played by school. Teachers were seen as specialists to turn to when their children were having problems. They emphasized learning strategies such as memory and repetition. Their beliefs were more consistent with a skills-based approach, according to which children acquired a set of skills by seeing and hearing, rather than engaging with literacy materials. As Lynch et al. (2006) point out, parents act on their beliefs in terms of the literacy experiences they provide. This is of concern, as these children may come to see reading as a school-based task rather than a leisure activity, with consequences for later achievement. As McGee and Richgels (2003) poignantly point out "Older children bring home fewer books and may view literacy as copying or completing worksheets rather than thinking deeply about texts that are interesting" (p. 9).

As well as investigating what the mothers referred to, it is interesting to consider to what they did not refer. None of the groups referred to many of the pedagogical practices in which professional educators engage such as scaffolding, dramatic play, oral language, literacy-enriched environments, and so forth. This supports the view that for many children, tertiary qualified early childhood teachers may provide learning opportunities that are different from, and complementary to, those that occur in their homes.

Implications for Early Childhood Educators

It is frequently asserted in the literature that educators must form partnerships with parents. The findings of this study suggest that not all mothers see their role as a literacy teacher for their child. This has implications for the many family literacy programs operating in kindergartens, nongovernment agencies, and government departments. Such programs promulgate the message that parents are children's first literacy teachers and that they should read books to their children every day. For example, Bennett et al. (2002) say that "intervention programs focusing on teaching parents developmentally appropriate ways to foster language and literacy skills in preschool children seem promising" (p. 312). The danger here is that if such practices contradict mothers' own deeply held beliefs, attitudes, and values, they are likely to be regarded as punitive, with detrimental effects to both children and parents (Baker et al., 1997; Grant, 2001; Janes & Kermani, 2001).

Rather than trying to instill in parents practices that are antithetical and do not make sense to them, it may be more productive to provide home activities that are consistent with parents' beliefs such as spelling lists and drills. According to Goldenberg (2001), parents may then be able to engage wholeheartedly in their children's education. At the same time, children need access to affordable preschool education with qualified early childhood teachers who will naturally convey their own pleasure and enjoyment in literature. This is consistent with the perspective offered by Hull and Schultz (2002): "rather than

setting formal and informal education systems and contexts in opposition to each other, we might do well to look for overlap or complementarity or perhaps a respectful division of labor" (p. 3).

Limitations of this Study and Directions for Future Research

The findings reported here are based on one relatively open-ended interview with the mothers. Further research could engage more extensively with mothers from a range of backgrounds, in order to provide a more subtle and complex account of their beliefs about literacy education. Another area of investigation is how the mothers' early experiences with stories and other literacy experiences have influenced how they share picture books with their children.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Preparatory Questions
- You've just read some picture books to your child. What did you think of the books that were used for this project? Why?
- Which of the books did you prefer? Why?
- Did your child like any of the books? Why or why not? How did you know whether your child liked the books or not?
- What did you think of reading to your child like that with the tape recorder on? Did it feel ordinary, comfortable, uncomfortable, unusual, strange …?

Mother's Early Childhood Experiences
- Was reading or story telling a big part of your childhood?
- If so, who read or told you stories?

- Did you have a favourite story? Why was it a favourite?
- Was there a story that you really disliked? What did you dislike about it?
- Was there a pattern to this early reading/story sharing? Was it before bed, after dinner, round the camp fire, when a particular relative came to visit?
- What kinds of stories were they?

Home Literacy Practices
- Do your children get told stories (by you or anyone else)?
- If so, does this occur on a regular basis?
- What sort of patterns accompany these sessions?
- What sort of stories do your children get told?
- Do they have favourites?
- What about now, do you yourself read often? How often? What sorts of things do you read?
- Do you think your early childhood experiences have influenced the kind of parent you are now? If so, in what way?
- How do you think children learn to read?
- Does your child like books and reading?
- Does your child like singing songs from radio, TV, videos, etc? Which ones?
- Does your child have a favourite book?
- Why do you think your child loves that book?
- How often do you read to your child?
- Where and when do you read?
- Are there any special rituals (toys, snacks) associated with reading?
- Does your child engage in socio-dramatic play?
- Who does your child play with?
- How do you decide which books you will read to your child?
- How much time, on average, would you spend reading books to your child (alone or with other children)?

Concluding Questions and Comments
- Anything else you would like to tell us about your child's engagement with books?
- Anything else you would like to tell us about your ideas and beliefs and attitudes toward literacy, either for yourself or your child, or just in general?