Families and schools working together to promote family literacy development

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Opsomming

Geletterdheidsontwikkeling wat volkome op skoolgeleerdheid staat-maak, sal waarskynlik nie suksesvol wees nie; dit is van deurslag-gewende belang om geletterdheid van die vroegste ouderdom af tuis te ontwikkel. Dit is in die besonder die verantwoordelikheid van Christengesinne om geletterdheidsvaardighede onder hul kinders te kweek deur geloofgebaseerde geletterheid tuis in te oefen en te modelleer. Skole voorsien ook nie alleenlik formele onderrig in ge-letterdheid nie, maar kan 'n beduidende rol in die bevordering van gesinsgeletterdheidspraktyke speel. In hierdie artikel word die waarde en hedendaagse praktyke van gesinsgeletterdheid aan die hand van 'n gevallestudie en teen die agtergrond van 'n omvattende literatuuroorsig bespreek. Omvattende data is van 'n prinsipaal, on-derwyser en ouers in 'n multikulturele stedelike kleuterskool inge-samel deur middel van veelvuldige data-insamelingstegnieke: waarneming, individuele en fokusgroeponderhoude, en 'n vraelys wat aan alle ouers uitgedeel is. Die bevindinge word bespreek vol-gens die volgende temas: geletterdheidshulpbronne tuis, geletterd-heidspraktyke vir die vestiging van verhoudinge, geletterdheids-praktyke om toegang tot inligting te verkry, geletterdheidspraktyke met die oog op genot en/of selfuitdrukking, en geletterdheidspraktyke vir die ontwikkeling van vaardighede. Op grond van hierdie bevin-dinge word daar aanbeveel dat skole gesinsgeletterdheid moet be-

vorder deur leiding aan gesinne te gee ten opsigte van hoe om kin-derliteratuur te kies, by 'n biblioteek aan te sluit, storieboeklees-vaardighede uit te brei, aandag aan drukwerk in die omgewing te gee, en die ontwikkeling van kinderskryfvaardighede aan te moedig.

Abstract

Literacy development that depends entirely on school learning is unlikely to be successful; it is crucial to develop literacy at home from the earliest age. Christian families, in particular, have a responsibility to nurture literacy skills among their children by practising and modelling faith-based literacy in the home. In addition to providing formal literacy instruction, the school can play a significant role in encouraging family literacy practices. This article discusses the value and contemporary practices of family literacy by means of a case study backed by an extensive literature review. Rich data was gathered from a principal, teacher and parents in a multicultural urban preschool by means of multiple data-gathering techniques: observation, individual and focus-group interviews, and a questionnaire distributed to all parents. Findings are discussed according to the following themes: literacy resources in the home, literacy practices for establishing relationships, literacy practices for accessing information, literacy practices for pleasure and/or self-expression, and literacy practices for skills development. Based on the findings, it is recommended that schools encourage family literacy by guiding families on how to choose children's literature, become members of a library, extend story-book reading skills, pay attention to environmental print and encourage the development of children's writing skills.

1. Introduction

Literacy begins at home. The family plays an essential role in the development of language and literacy skills of children (Edwards, 2004; Epstein, 1992; Cairney, 2005; Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, 2006; Nutbrown, Hannon & Morgan, 2005). Christian parents are tasked with training their children spiritually, cognitively and emotionally and this cannot be done without the continual guidance and wisdom supplied by

the Word of God (Ryan, 2000:53). Thus, the link between literacy and the Christian family is undeniable. In popular idiom Christians have been labeled as the 'people of the Book', the Holy Scriptures (Jeffrey, 1996:5). Throughout the centuries the promotion of literacy has gone hand in hand with the Church's task and mission to spread the gospel throughout the world. Clearly Christian parents have a particular responsibility to train their child in the ways of God and instruct him or her in the Gospel teachings from a very early age (Grana, 2002:146). Moreover, Ryan (2000:54) points out that Christian parents have an additional responsibility: to model literacy by their own regular reading and study of the Bible. Nor should the latter be the only source of literature in the Christian home; Christian parents should encourage the reading of a variety of quality literature. They should also engage with their children in discussing what they read and link reading activities to character development where appropriate (Ryan, 2000:54). Should Christian parents entirely relinquish the development of literacy to external agencies, such as the school, they are neglecting their appointed responsibility, as literacy development and enrichment that depend entirely on school learning are unlikely to be successful. Therefore, families should be encouraged to engage in a variety of informal forms of literacy development with children; however, in this process the school's support is essential.

In the light of this argument, a case study was undertaken to examine how families of pre-school children practice family-based literacy development and in what ways are they supported by the school in this endeavour. The case study enquiry was framed by an extensive literature study. Based on the findings, recommendations are made for school support of family literacy practices.

2. Family literacy

The term, family literacy, captures all the literacy beliefs and activities that families engage in, spontaneously with the child, from infancy, to stimulate literacy development. This includes the intergenerational transfer of literacy skills to children by family members without the direct involvement of the school or other institutions (Wasik & Hermann, 2004:3). Every family brings to child rearing natural and spontaneous literacy practices which are also dependent on cultural and socio-economic factors (Thomas, Fazio & Stiefelmeyer, 1999:5). However, a single comprhensive definition of family literacy is hard to find. Multiple meanings of family literacy abound and endeavours to provide a definitive description of the concept date from

the 1960s, according to the views of different literacy experts and their theoretical frameworks (Handel, 1999:20). But there is agreement that certain essential aspects of family literacy encompass the way parents, children and extended family members use literacy at home and in the community; literacy development occurs naturally during routines of daily living in the completion of typical home tasks; other family literacy activities may be initiated purposefully by a parent or family member, to promote a child's language development or the enjoyment of language; and family literacy activities reflect the ethnic, racial or cultural heritage of the families involved (Morrow, 1996:54). Further, the family contribution to a child's literacy is taken in its broadest sense to include various household members, such as parents, particularly mothers (Handel, 1999:63; Silven, Pekka & Voeten, 2002:1133), members of the extended family, particularly grandparents (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2000:633; Reese, Garnier & Saracho, 2002:113), siblings (Williams, 2004:52) and other non-formal and professional caregivers (James & Kermani, 2002:458; Sparling, 2004:49).

Development of literacy in the home is complex and varied (Cairney, 2003:89, 91). Cairney and Ruge (1998) classify practices in the home according to the purposes for literacy: literacy for establishing or maintaining relationships; literacy for accessing or displaying information; literacy for pleasure and or self-expression and literacy for skills development. Roskos and Twardosz (2004: 294) describe the home literacy environment in terms of physical resources (such as space time and materials), social aspects (people, knowledge and relationships) and symbolic resources (routines and community, society and culture). Leichter (1984:38) distinguishes three aspects to the home literacy environment: interpersonal interaction, the physical environment and the emotional and motivational climate. Examination of these categorisations show that home literacy practices largely overlap and thus Leichter's rubrics have been selected to frame the following discussion.

Interpersonal interaction refers to literacy experiences shared with a child or modelled by parents, siblings and other individuals in the home. Literacy experiences are related to parents' reading to children (Ortiz, Stowe & Arnold, 2001:263); parent-child talk involving books (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002:318); parents' listening to a child's reading (Hannon & Bird, 2004:26); parents' own reading practices whereby parents read a variety of materials (novels, magazines, newspapers, work-related material), thus modelling diverse reading practices to the children (Edwards, 2004:50); parents' ownership of books or their borrowing of books from the

public library, thus modelling the value of books (Morrow, 1996:57); religious practice at home involving literacy, such as daily Bible reading with children and memorizing scriptures (Edwards, 2004:93) and literacy events required for daily living, such as filling in forms, reading manuals or recipes and writing lists (Anderson & Stokes, 1984:24). Moreover, in literacy rich home environments children are restricted in their television viewing (Morrow, 1996:59). In particular, special mention is made here of the place and importance given to book reading in family literacy practices. This is warranted by the early attention (Huey, 1908) and ongoing attention given to it in research. Reading to infants, toddlers and primary and secondary school children is a spontaneous and natural pastime in many families with a myriad of benefits (Trelease, 2001:1). Early readers are almost always children who have been read to regularly; reading sessions provide an important emotional bridge between parents and child; reading sessions allow for spontaneous physical contact with a child; reading a story arouses children's emotions and sympathies giving them a chance to talk about their feelings; and reading provide a window to the wider world and the choices, joys and sorrows that children will meet as they journey through life (Trelease, 2001:35). Book reading encourages children's pretending to read or retelling of stories which is essentially experimentation with written language, although it occurs orally (Purcell-Gates, 2004:106).

The physical home literacy environment includes the presence in the home of literacy materials. This includes the availability of a range of reading materials (e.g., newspapers, magazines, books and dictionaries) (Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2004:85) and writing materials (crayons, paper, wordprocessors and printers). In literacy enriched home environments such materials are found throughout the house (in the bedroom, the kitchen, study, sitting room and family room) (Morrow, 1996:58). Currently the literacy environment is also made up of technology associated with literacy development. In homes where there are personal computers, televisions, video recorders, music centres and cell phones, children are introduced to technological and digital literacy from a very early age (Haight, 1996:54). Children observe parents doing electronic banking, reading and sending e-mails, faxes and messages on cell phones, playing video games, purchasing products on and downloading information from the Internet. The physical literacy environment of the home is further extended when children are taken to libraries, bookstores, supermarkets, cinemas, parents' offices and on the many other family excursions where talk and attention to print in the environment accompanies the outings,

thus enhancing speaking, listening and reading skills (Morrow, 1996:58). This leads to a further extension to Leitchner's (1984) distinction: the literacy environment created by community structures. Research has borne out the positive link between the child's development and social structures linked to the family, such as the church (Haight, 2002:195), the library (Jacobs, 2004:2001; Harbin, Herrmann, Wasik, Dobbins, & Lam, 2004:389; Shanahan & Rodriguez-Brown, 1993:9) and social clubs. Other studies have documented the role of peers in enhancing children's literacy (Chen & Gregory, 2004; Datta, 2004), community storytellers (Olmedo, 2004) and the Sunday School teacher in certain communities (Haight & Carter-Black, 2004; McMillon & Edwards, 2004).

The emotional and motivational dimension of the home literacy environment comprises the attitudes of parents towards literacy and their literacy goals for their children. Literacy may be seen only in terms of its pragmatic value or it may also be seen as a means to pleasurable pastime activities, such as reading, writing letters, doing crossword puzzles, searching for information and facilitating hobbies. Family attitudes which underlie literacy practices are culturally bound (Gregory, Long & Volk, 2004:11; Puchner, 1997) and class bound (Redding, 2005:480). The child's attitude to literacy is more powerfully influenced by parental factors than other aspects of school learning, such as numeracy (Cairney, 2003:87). Frequently, family attitudes to literacy diverge from the school in families where English is a second language or where English is not used at all (Strucker, Snow & Pan, 2004:467). Parental attitudes linked to class or socio-economic status and home language are seen clearly in how families use reading in the home (Powell, Okagaki & Bojczyk, 2004: 554). Lower income parents tend to use a more didactic approach to reading and stress skills development; middle income parents tend to view reading as a source of entertainment (Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell & Schmidt, 2000:107). Moreover, middle-income parents are more likely to model positive attitudes to reading, positive reading habits and correct language use; all of which promote school success (Redding, 2005:482).

3. School support of early literacy practice at home

Morrow (1996:59) points out that in general the proportion of families who create a rich literacy environment for their children is small. Unfortunately not all home environments provide sound or sufficient literacy opportunities for children and children are thus not properly prepared for success in the school or the workplace (Wasik & Hermann, 2004:8). According to

Edwards (2004:50), children in many families are never exposed to story-book routines, access to writing materials, and literacy-rich games and toys. Bennett, Wiegel and Martin (2002:310) indicate that a child who is not involved in activities pertaining to books and reading in the home is at greater risk for developing reading difficulties than a child with a richer literacy home environment.

Thus, the school has a key role to play in supporting family literacy prac-tice. Teachers concerned about children's literacy skills should collaborate with parents to enhance the family literacy environment and help to pro-vide effective and pleasant learning encounters whereby both family and school can share knowledge, insights and questions. Schools are ideally placed to incorporate organised support for family literacy in their parent involvement policies and programmes. Both families and schools should ensure that children acquire language skills, positive attitudes to books and literacy and knowledge about print to ensure their school success (Dickinson, St Pierre & Weyl, 2004:137). Educators must be aware that many families fail to create the interpersonal, physical and emotional and motivational environments (Leichter, 1984) described above, due to parents' own limited literacy abilities; the use of a minority language as a home language; and parents' own lack of ease or familiarity with typical family literacy activities such as shared reading. In these circumstances educators must make special efforts to recognise, accommodate, support and strengthen literacy skills among such families. But in spite of the overwhelming evidence in favour of school support for family literacy, teachers often do not have appropriate training to assist the family in creating a home environment to support family literacy (Chavkin, 2005:164). If teachers are to present or facilitate family literacy work, they require additional knowledge and skills in relation to wider aspects of pedagogy, such as early childhood development, language development and literacy issues and practices in culturally diverse homes, often with low parental literacy levels. The following issues have been frequently raised by literacy experts in many different countries and contexts. These are of both theoretical and practical interest and should be noted by teachers who wish to develop literacy focused partnerships with families.

3.1 Cultural diversity and multilingualism

Educators often have a limited knowledge of the experiences of minority groups and have distinctly different definitions of culture and the approaches that should be used to integrate culture within literacy support endeavours

(Wrigley, 2004:407). In non-English speaking families, the literacy culture (communication style, role and importance of literacy and the nature of literacy interactions) is likely to differ from mainstream monolingual English speaking expectations, particularly those held in schools where English is the language of learning and teaching. Moreover, economically deprived non-English speaking homes may also lack children's reading and writing materials in the vernacular, adult literacy materials in the vernacular and parents themselves may have very limited literacy and numeracy skills (Lemmer, Meier & Van Wyk, 2006:41). Therefore, schools implementing family literacy initiatives need to consider the content, mode of delivery and materials used in programmes for non-English speaking families.

3.2 'Deficit' approaches

According to a 'deficit' model, families may be involved in literacy practices and have many related skills, but these practices are not valued by schools. According to Cairney (2003:85) and Vernon-Feagans, Head-Reeves and Kainz (2004:434), many family literacy programmes are aimed at taking school literacy into families and may ignore, undervalue or even look down on families' unique literacy practices. Cultural, socio-economic and class differences among families which affect literacy practices should not be summarily dismissed as deficits by schools. Nevertheless, Nutbrown *et al.* (2005:27) caution that such 'deficits' should also not be summarily ignored but should be recognised with sensitivity if they are to be addressed effectively. Schools who wish to develop literacy focussed parent involvement must offer diverse families enriched and additional literacy practices to address the families' shortcomings, while recognising and building on their existing strengths. External efforts to enhance family literacy can be limited severely if schools and other agencies do not consider the family's communication style, views of literacy and the nature of literacy interactions in the home (Cairney, 2003:87). Hollins (1996:33) argues that educators should practise cultural accommodation by legitimising the literacy practices of all families, irrespective of culture or class; by connecting formal literacy learning and family literacy learning acquired in the home and community; and by connecting formal literary learning with cultural and intergenerational literacy learning.

3.3 Gender issues

Family literacy programmes consistently refer to family or parent involvement, however, research shows that home literacy practices, as well as

external literacy programmes are overwhelmingly dominated by mothers. Nutbrown *et al*. (2005:29) mention less than ten percent of father involvement in family literacy programmes in the United Kingdom. The highly gendered nature of family literacy can also be extended in general to the nature of parent involvement in education. Father involvement in school-based programmes is often constrained by employment and cultural expectations of the masculine role and schools should rather seek to involve fathers in home-based activities which do not require attendance at the school. However, fathers can play an essential role in enhancing children's early literacy development (Cairney, 2003:86). Moreover, a growing body of research indicates gender differences in boys' literacy preferences (Knowles & Smith, 2005; Sullivan, 2003), literacy practices (Booth, 2002) and literacy achievements (Connell & Gunzelmann, 2004:14).   In the United States reading scores of boys are declining, raising concern about their literacy skills in general (US Department of Education, 2002). Again educators wishing to support home literacy practices should endeavour to implement practices appropriate to fathers and boys.

4. Context and setting of the study

Against the above background, the following research question was formulated: *How can the literacy practices of families with preschool children be described and to what extent does the school inform and enrich such practices?* A case study was undertaken to explore family literacy practices in a selected preschool and to explore school support given to parents. Gall, Gall and Borg (2010:339) define a case study as the indepth study of a phenomenon bounded in time and place in its natural context; typically data is collected over a period of time by more than one method of data collection. Furthermore, Gall *et al.* (2010: 346) suggest that a case study can be used to describe the phenomenon by providing a thick description (Gall *et al*., 2010:346). Thus, a clear statement is necessary of how the site and persons studied in a case are defined (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:26). In this inquiry, the research site was a multicultural preschool situated in an established suburb in Pretoria. The school was selected by judgment sampling as a suitable case on the basis of the following criteria. It has been operating successfully for over twenty years and has a reputation for excellence in the local community as demonstrated by the regular enrolment of 'second generation' learners, that is, the children of former pupils. The school was founded by the present principal who is deeply committed to supporting families in literacy practices and holds an accredited qualification in parent involvement. Since the

early 90s the school has become increasingly multicultural. Parents are mainly from a professional middle class income group including public servants, business people, teachers and lecturers from a local university. Among the home languages presently represented are Sotho, English, Afrikaans, French and German. The principal attested that several English second language (ESL) families had chosen the school because they wished their children to become proficient in English. The school follows the Montessori method of teaching. Although the school enrolls children of different religious backgrounds, it has always adopted a strong Christian ethos due to the personal religious convictions of the principal and the staff. The physical facilities are pleasant and homely; the school is well-resourced and staff is suitably qualified.

5. Data gathering and analysis

The school principal granted the researcher access to the school to conduct the research. Visits to the school and a workshop with teachers and parents provided the researcher with additional information about the school, its ethos, mission, values and parent involvement practices. Data was gathered from the principal, a teacher and all parents, using a mixed method design using a questionnaire for parents and qualitative interviewing (with the principal, teacher and selected parents). An individual interview was conducted with the principal and four interviews with the teacher who has also been associated with the school since the school's inception, both as a former parent and as a member of staff. The aim of the interviews was to gather information about the role played by the school in supporting family literacy. One focus group interview was conducted with ten parents (two fathers, seven mothers and one grandmother) at the school after a general school meeting. The principal and teacher also participated in the focus group interview. Field notes were taken during the interviews. In addition, a questionnaire was distributed to each family in the school (n = 52) to obtain further information about family literacy practices. The questionnaire was adapted from Cairney and Ruge's (1998) questionnaire designed to obtain a description of family literacy practices and used the following four main categories: literacy for establishing relationships; literacy for accessing information; literacy for pleasure and self-expression and literacy for skills development. In each category examples of home literacy events are listed with the view to the identification of common home practices by respondents. The questionnaire adapted for this study added a section dealing with literacy resources available in the home. No open items were given, which was both a limi-

tation and an advantage. Parents' responses were thus limited to available choices; however, closed items meant the questionnaire could be completed quickly on the spot to secure a positive response rate. The response rate was 100%, as questionnaires were distributed at a parents' meeting during which parents were given time for completion and subsequently collected. Parents who did not attend the meeting received questionnaires when parents collected children from school. They were asked to complete the questionnaires immediately and return them forthwith. The cooperation of the principal and teacher ensured that all questionnaires were returned. Finally, ethical requirements were fulfilled through the following strategies: permission for the research was agreed upon by the principal in collaboration with staff and parent leaders; all participants were clearly informed of the research aim; involvement by all participants was voluntary and all participants were assured of confidentiality by keeping the identity of the school and of participants anonymous in the presentation of the findings.

In qualitative research data analysis is the process during which the researcher formally identifies themes as they are suggested by the data and an endeavour is made to demonstrate support for those themes (Delamont, 2002:171). In this research the interviews were held before the results of the questionnaire became available: the researcher analysed the field notes and by reading and rereading tentative themes were identified. The questionnaire data was analysed manually due to the small sample and integrated with qualitative data gathered during interviews. The decision was made to present the integrated data according to Cairney and Ruge's (1998) four categories and the additional theme: literacy resources in the home. Trustworthiness of the inquiry was ensured by the following steps as recommended by McMillan and Schumacher (2006:374): the use of a well-accepted questionnaire (Cairney & Ruge, 1998) as survey tool; checking and rechecking of manual analysis of questionnaire; thoughtful assessment of truth value of qualitative data during the interviews and during data analysis; critical consideration of the source of the data (e.g., principal and teacher with lengthy prior knowledge of the school); measurement of vague statements against specific statements; and acknowledgement of the researchers' own assumptions about the importance of family literacy. Final cross-checking of findings took place by sharing results of questionnaires with the principal and the teacher. Furthermore, the limitations of the research are acknowledged: the inquiry was limited to a single, in-depth case and does not seek to be generalisable in any way.

6. Results and discussion

The findings are presented according to five themes: literacy resources in the home; literacy practices for establishing relationships; literacy practices for accessing information; literacy practices for pleasure and/or self-expression; and literacy practices for skills development.

6.1 Literacy resources in the home

Questionnaire responses indicated that most homes were well supplied with print materials such as newspapers (84%) and magazines (97%). Eighty percent of parents indicated family book collections and 90% of parents indicated that their children had their own book collections. In the focus group some parents indicated that they considered books expensive items to purchase, did not consider books as gifts at birthdays or other special occasions and were reluctant to shop for books at bookstores. In contrast, the principal and teacher indicated that good quality illustrated children's books could be purchased from as little as R20 per book at local bookstores and supermarkets. However, they admitted that they had never pointed this out to parents during parents' meetings or suggested parent excursions to purchase books. Parents immediately responded enthusiastically to these possibilities. Less than half (43%) of the parents indicated public library membership further limiting the books available to children. Harbin *et al*. (2004:389), Jacobs (2004:2001) and Shanahan and Rodriguez-Brown (1993:9) stress the value of library membership which gives families cheap, if not free, access to a wealth of children's literature. During the focus group, parents cited as reasons for non-membership of libraries as too little time or uncertainty about how to proceed with library membership. The principal and teacher confessed that the school had not considered assisting parents with local library membership. Neither had they considered giving parents guidance about children's literature, the selection or purchase of children's books. However, the school had implemented the following positive practice: on a child's birthday the parents are requested to purchase and donate a book to the school's library. Furthermore, the school library is available to the families for the loan of books to families but, according to the teacher, "this effort must be continually driven else the library is not used". Two-thirds of the parents indicated the growing access of families to Internet (63%) and the use of e-mail (66%) and most families provided access to children's videos and audio recordings of children's books.

6.2 Literacy practices for establishing relationships

In the questionnaire and focus group parents were asked to indicate which literacy events for establishing or maintaining personal relationships between parents and children (cf Cairney & Ruge, 1998) took place regularly in their homes. All parents indicated that they read children's stories to their children. Book reading is valued not only as a literacy event, but a time of physical closeness and emotional bonding between parent and child (Trelease, 2001:38). Moreover, the majority of parents indicated that they regularly read to their children from the Bible or a religious book at bedtime. As mentioned in the literature review, earlier storybook reading to children is often accompanied by reading from the Bible and, in many families with a limited experience of literacy, Bible reading is the only shared reading that takes place in the home. Written activities, such as making birthday cards or decorating letters or notes, were less common. Less than half the children enjoyed playing school, which involves activities such as play with books, pretending to read, giving instructions to peers, scribbling and drawing and using a chalkboard. The children's exposure to cell phones correlated with the high percentage of cell phones owned by parents as disclosed by the questionnaire and in the focus group interview. Parents indicated their increasing use of cell phones for SMS messaging and confirmed that their children were aware of this function of the cell phone at an early age. The fascination of young children with cell phone and its related functions, such as SMS messaging, taking digital photos and games played on the cell phone, was stressed by several parents during the focus group interview. Parents also indicated that children played with toy cell phones. This corroborates Shopen, Liddicoat and Fitzgerald's (1999:18) finding that children are increasingly engaged more with screen-based, electronic text than with written print, and schools should seek to utilize these new trends positively in literacy development. However, the school did not own a computer and the teachers did not purposefully incorporate the everyday use of technology, such as the cell phone, into lessons.

Furthermore, the questionnaire requested parents to indicate the family members who are involved in reading with the child, the frequency and the time of day of book reading. Mothers (53%) comprised the largest group who read to the child. This confirms the earlier discussion which indicates that mothers generally take sole responsibility for reading with the child, an activity which is seen as part of the maternal nurturing responsibility. A small percentage of fathers indicated that they read to children. A third of

the respondents (36%) indicated that both parents read with children. Grandparent involvement and sibling involvement appeared limited (23%). This could be ascribed to grandparents who live at a distance and siblings who are still too young to read. However, in the individual and focus group interviews, both parents and teachers acknowledged the valuable role that grandparents can play in shared reading. The grandmother who partici-pated in the focus group interview confirmed that she was her grand-daughter's primary reader: "It's me! I am the one who reads to her". All the parents except one indicated that reading sessions with the child took place most frequently at bedtimes. Half the parents (50%) indicated that they read with their child everyday; 46% of the parents read with the child at least three times a week and 4% only read to the child on weekends. These results reflect poorly when compared to a survey by Purcell-Gates (2004:109) who found well-read-to children in a lower to middle class sample were generally read to five times a day. The interviews with the principal and teacher and focus group with parents respectively indicated that a lack of time due to busy work schedules was the main reason that parents did not read to children every day. Both the principal and the teacher bemoaned a decline in the familiarity with traditional children's literature that children should bring to the preschool from home. Children were increasingly less familiar with traditional fairy stories, nursery rhymes and characters and stories from the Bible; instead children were more familiar with television and movie characters (e.g., Barney, Shrek); television celebrities; and comic heroes (e.g., Superman, Spiderman).

6.3 Literacy practices for accessing information

The parents were asked to indicate which literacy events for accessing or displaying information (cf Cairney & Ruge, 1998) took place regularly in the family. Two-thirds of families draw children's attention to or discuss the print on food labeling and children recognise different brandnames. Simi-larly, two-thirds of parents agreed that children play on the home computer. However, although the same number of parents reported that children may look at recipe books, less than half are purposefully exposed to non-fiction texts. Less than half (40%) reported that children recognise road signs. In the focus group interview, parents agreed with some surprise that they had never thought of using daily travelling time spend with children in the car to explain, point out and play games with environmental print.   Less than a third of the parents (30%) reported children playing games with used in-voices, forms or bills in which visits to the bank or to the store were emu-lated. During the focus group interview it appeared that parents tended to

think of literacy practice in terms of conventional activities, such as storybook readings, and were less aware of exploiting the myriad everyday situations in which the importance and use of print or symbols can be spontaneously pointed out to children. This corroborates similar findings by Purcell-Gates (2004). There are many ways that educators can encourage parents to increase language exposure by exposing children to the reading of a variety of texts found in most homes, such as advertisements, labels, forms, accounts, manuals *et cetera* and by pointing out to children environmental print, such as road signs, billboards, advertisements and other signage prominently displayed in public places.

6.4 Literacy practices for pleasure and/or self-expression

The parents were asked to indicate which literacy events for pleasure and/or self-expression (cf Cairney & Ruge, 1998) took place regularly in the family context. Most parents reported that children often draw pictures, write their names, look at magazines or comics on their own, play cards or board games, do jigsaw puzzles, watch television programmes, watch children's TV and listen to tapes or CDs. Although children play on the computer, few play computer games (20%). However, parents admitted that many of these activities had not been initiated in the home and had only emerged after children began to attend preschool. The principal and teacher confirmed that children were exposed daily to these popular literacy activities during the school day. Parents agreed that, to large extent, children has been taught or 'coached' to engage in these activities mainly in school and had subsequently introduced these interests into the home. Thus, children requested parents to purchase puzzles, board games, DVDs, audio tapes and CD recordings of children's stories because they enjoyed them at school, not because they had been introduced to them in the early years of childhood at home.

6.5 Literacy practices for skills development

The parents were asked to indicate which literacy events for skills development (cf Cairney & Ruge, 1998) took place regularly in the family. Parents were not asked to assess children's literacy abilities; they were asked to indicate if children were regularly given the opportunity, or were encouraged to carry out activities listed in the questionnaire. The majority of parents (94%) reported that children count aloud. A smaller majority of respondents reported that children tell their own stories, re-tell stories and pretend to read print. As mentioned above (cf Purcell-Gates, 2004), nar-

rating an own story, retelling a story or pretending to read are sophisticated forms of oral language use which is more appropriate to written language use (i.e. vocabulary, syntax and register that is more explicit and decontextualised). Moreover, these activities are linked to how often a child is read to by parents. In the focus group interview some parents remarked that it had never occurred to them to ask the child to retell stories, to make up own stories or to pretend to read. They regarded storytelling or reading as a practice regulated by the parent not the child. The teachers in contrast were practiced in various strategies to extend storybook reading using these and other skills, such predicting and talking about alternative story endings. However, they had not attempted to hold any parent reading training workshops during the school's long history. They frequently admonished parents to "read more" to their children during parents' meetings, but had neglected to explain or demonstrate how this could be done.

Moreover, literacy activities using writing skills in the home lagged behind activities using reading or oral skills. Only half of the parents reported that children engaged in copying numbers or the letters of the alphabet. Knowledge of the alphabet at school entry is one of the single best predictors of reading achievement (Roskos & Twardosz, 2004: 291) and a basic knowledge of letters (e.g. the first letter of one's name or siblings' names or surname) requires the ability to distinguish between letters. Possibly these school-like activities are neglected in the home as they require time, adult motivation and guidance which parents may lack. Moreover, the teacher acknowledged that she had not considered instructing/requesting parents to encourage writing digits or letters of the alphabet with children as an at-home activity.

7. Conclusion

Literacy development is not automatic. Children learn literacy through social processes. The professionalization of teaching literacy by the school has tended to marginalize the role of the home in supporting literacy. Both parents and teachers tend to perceive the school as the most important vehicle for literacy development. However, support of home literacy practices by the school strengthens the child's overall literacy development. Children develop skills before coming to school and continue to engage in multiple literacy practices at home after starting school. However, teachers cannot build on and value home literacy practices and resources if they do not know about them. A school-based survey of families' literacy practices such as conducted as part of the case study can serve to illustrate to

teachers the extent and the nature of home-based literacy practices. With this knowledge the school can build strategies to encourage parents. Parents would benefit by guidance and encouragement from the school in buying books, joining a library, extending story book reading skills, paying attention to environmental print and encouraging the child's writing skills. These topics provide a wealth of content for workshops, talks, take home activities and home visits by teachers who are committed to developing a home-school literacy partnership. Support of literacy by home and school is a reflection of Christian norms of responsibility and is essential if children are, among others, to become acquainted with God's Word and to transfer the practice of faith-based literacy to the next generation.

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