FAMILY ENGAGEMENTS: REKINDLING THE BAYANIHAN (COMMUNITY) SPIRIT IN DEVELOPING EARLY LITERACY AND LANGUAGE-RICH ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

Emergent literacy research demonstrates that children's oral language, reading, and writing develop concomitantly in literate environment in early family settings (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2003). To become a skilled reader, children need a rich language and conceptual knowledge base, a broad and deep vocabulary, and verbal reasoning abilities to understand messages that are conveyed through print (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004; McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001). This qualitative case study research explored how literacy development in early years was enhanced in a print-rich multilingual environment through a language-rich home and school collaboration program provided by an inclusive school. Participants were five children, enrolled in an age-appropriate inclusive preschool program, from five families in a multilingual setting including preschool educators and caregivers. Specifically, this study sought to answer: (1) What strategies were utilized by both the school and the families to create meaningful language –rich home and school program to children (children with and without disabilities)? (2) How did parents in language-rich home-link program perceive their child's home to be a "Real Book" environment? (3) How did parents realize language-rich home and school program to be a crucial goal in their child's literacy development during preschool years? ; and (4) How did parents and professionals involved define and support language-rich home and school program? Data collection focused on emergent literacy of young children and how home environment and family practice supported such development utilizing triangulation of semi-structured interviews; field observations of authentic interfaces during parents' education program meetings and workshops; on-site examination of literate environment; focus-group discussion, document and videotape analysis. Results revealed evocative discernments gained from young children's early literacy development that challenges preschool educators to reflect more essentially and inclusively about home-school collaboration and parental involvement in early literacy development.

Keywords: Language-rich, Family Involvement, Early Literacy

Introduction

There is limited research examining how language and literacy environment at home support the emergent literacy of young children in a bilingual or multilingual family setting (Soltero-Gonzalez, 2008). Furthermore, there are significant gaps in our understandings of the antecedents of early literacy skills between birth to 3 (Parlakian, 2010). The issue of linguistic diversity needs to be addressed so that there will be a smooth transition from home to school setting. Besides, as teachers work with increasing numbers of children and families from different cultural and linguistic background, it is essential that they recognize and value the different ways literacy is supported in homes and communities (Mui & Anderson, 2008).

What counts as a literacy rich environment requires careful consideration. Any attempt to define or measure the quality of a specific context must look beyond quantitative measures, recognizing that the interaction between variables in any context is complex. Literacy practices are defined as 'cultural ways of utilizing literacy' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, in Volk & de Acosta, 2003) and include the behaviours of those involved as well as the ways in which they understand and value literacy (Volk & de Acosta, 2003). Three related aspects of the home environment frequently employed to provide a measure of home environment and literacy practices are: a) shared reading experiences between parents and children; b) parental beliefs about literacy; and c) the parents' own literacy practices (Foy & Mann, 2003).

Frequency of shared storybook reading has often been used as a means of quantifying the home literacy environment, with differences in the frequency of book reading for middle and lower income children well documented (Kuo, Franke, Regalado & Halfon, 2004; Pellegrini, Galda, Jones & Perlmutter, 1995; Sonnenschein, Brody & Munsterman, 1996). However, it would be simplistic to assume that the frequency of storybook reading is solely related to parental values or beliefs. For example, levels of storybook reading may be in part due to differences in availability of books. Limited resources can and do serve as powerful constraints on activity (Cooter, 2006; Wilson, 1987). Material resources, an important part of an ecological setting, have been under-examined as a potential factor for explaining differences in type and quality of everyday experiences. It would also be simplistic to assume that frequency of storybook reading or of other specific literacy-related practices in isolation are reliable predictors of later literacy outcomes. For example, Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal (2005) found that a global measure of overall responsiveness and support of the home environment was a stronger predictor of children's early language and literacy skills than were specific literacy practices such as shared book reading. Activities such as storytelling have potential to influence children's interest in reading and development of early literacy skills (Britto, Brooks-Gunn & Griffin, 2006; Cline & Necochea, 2003; Fiorentino & Howe, 2004) yet the focus has been predominantly on story book reading.

In the Philippines, according to the National Statistics Office (2011) basic literacy is almost universal in the Philippines. Of the estimated 68 million Filipinos 10 years old and over in 2008, 95.6 percent are basically literate. The basic literacy rate is 96.1 percent among females and 95.1 percent among males. By region, basic literacy rates are about the same for males and females. As to the functional literacy, results also show that the rate among females is higher than among males. Overall, functional literacy rate is 88.7 percent for females and 84.2 percent for males. Among the 15 to 24 age group, 94.0

percent of females as compared to 88.7 percent of males are functionally literate. Meanwhile, 87.6 percent of females and 84.1 percent of males in the 25 to 64 age group are functionally literate. In four regions, namely, Eastern Visayas, Western Visayas, Bicol, and Caraga female functional literacy rates are at least eight percentage points higher than male functional literacy rates.

A major proponent of the idea that language depends largely on environment was the behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1936). He believed that language is acquired through principles of conditioning, including association, imitation, and reinforcement. According to this view, children learn words by associating sounds with objects, actions, and events. They also learn words and syntax by imitating others. Adults enable children to learn words and syntax by reinforcing correct speech. Critics of this idea argue that a behaviorist explanation is inadequate. They maintain several arguments:

- Learning cannot account for the rapid rate at which children acquire language.
- There can be an infinite number of sentences in a language. All these sentences cannot be learned by imitation.
- Children make errors, such as overregularizing verbs. For example, a child may say Billy hitted me, incorrectly adding the usual past tense suffix -ed to hit. Errors like these can't result from imitation, since adults generally use correct verb forms.
- Children acquire language skills even though adults do not consistently correct their syntax.

Clearly, the ecocultural structure of a community is more than a matter of material resources or specific practices; it is the social construction of families and the impact of daily experiences on children's lives. People's actions, goals, and circumstances within activity settings are profoundly interconnected, and children bring to preschool or school their own experiences of literacy and the social practices in which these have developed. For many children, these do not match the social practices of the school setting (Marsh, 2003) and they are faced with the dilemma of either changing their values and practices to accommodate the school setting, or if unwilling or unable to do so, they face the possibility of poor literacy and school outcomes.

Theoretical Framework and Research Problem
The study is based on the theory of social interaction that, "assumes language acquisition is influenced by the interaction of a number of factors – physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social," (Cooter & Reutzel, 2004). Perhaps two of the biggest names in the Interactionist Theory of Language acquisition are Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner.

Interactionists argue that language development is both biological and social. Interactionists argue that language learning is influenced by the desire of children to communicate with others. In contrast to the theoretical positions of behaviourism, the approach to language acquisition emphasizing that children are conditioned to learn language by a stimulus-response pattern with which it is sometimes confused, the social interactionist approaches rests on the premises of a social-cognitive model, emphasizing the child's construction of a social world which then serves as the context of language development (Gallaway and Richard, 1994).

This study sought to answer: (1) What strategies were utilized by both the school and the families to create meaningful language –rich home and school program to children (children with and without disabilities)? (2) How did parents in language-rich home-link program perceive their child's home to be a "Real Book" environment? (3) How did parents realize language-rich home and school program to be a crucial goal in their child's literacy development during preschool years? ; and (4) How did parents and professionals involved define and support language-rich home and school program?

Methodology

Research Design

Case study method was used in this study. A case study can be viewed as "an in-depth study of interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system" (Opie, 2005). For this paper, the focus of a case study is on a real situation with real people in an environment familiar to the researcher (Opie, 2004). A case study must be methodically prepared and the collection of evidence must be systematically undertaken (Opie, 2004). The observational method is the chosen method to understand another culture whereas, the case study is used to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena (Yin, 2003). Using the case study method allowed for exploration of actions and events over the participants over prolonged number of time in natural setting; providing a deeper understanding of their student teaching life (Yin, 2003). The observational method is the chosen method to understand another culture whereas, the case study is used to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena (Yin, 2003). Using the case study method allowed for exploration of actions and events over the participants over prolonged number of time in natural setting; providing a deeper understanding of their student teaching life (Yin, 2003).

Setting

This study took place in an inclusive school in Roxas City, Philippines that has included children with special needs since 1997. The school has been continuously permitted to function and since 1993 and nationally recognized in 2003. For school year 2014-2015, the school provides services to 148 children ages 1.5 years old through 6th grade. There are 21 teachers and is adhering play-based curriculum with lessons, activities and programs designed for children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength and integrates principles from the latest in education research such as, among others, Whole-Brain Learning, Multi-Grade Program, Socio-Emotional Learning, Multiple Intelligences Theory, Learning Styles, and Environment-based and Culture-based
education, eventually resulting to a curriculum tailored to each child's uniqueness. The school provides special education services and refers related services; paraprofessionals'/caregivers' training, parent education program and in-service personnel development are part of the school's services.

Participants

Learners, Teachers, Parents/Guardians. A total 16 participants were involved in the study –6 parents/guardians (with and without a child with special needs), 5 teachers and five learners (with and without special needs. All of the participating adults represented a broad range of capability and were exposed to inclusive education system. Five of the parents were mothers with one father and five teachers were female and worked on a

regular basis in the school.   Moreover, five learners were casually observed and interviewed in the course of the study. These learners were a combination of children with and without disabilities.

The partakers were purposively chosen for the study for the reason that they are particularly useful in the context of the study and are the major stakeholders are who are involved in designing, giving, receiving, or administering the program being deliberate (Given, 2008).

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis
In-depth and semi-structured interviews with study participants, on-site observations, focus group discussions, document and archival exploration were used during the span the student teaching period to craft communal and substantive accounts grounded on the stories of those who are deeply involved in the inclusive programs of both schools. Qualitative analysis was comprised of analysis of similarities and differences, coding and categorizing, and constant comparison (Lunenberg and Irby, 2008). Creswell (2007) divides data analysis in an ethnographic case study into five parts: 1) data managing, 2) coding and developing themes, 3) describing, 4) interpreting, and 5) representing. The researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles that spiral upward, in a process that allows him or her to produce a continually more detailed analysis. The researchers enter with data as text and exits with an account or narrative (Creswell, 2007). This analytic process contrasts with the more linear line of reasoning found in quantitative analysis.

Findings and Discussions
Strategies were utilized by both the school and the families to create meaningful language –rich home and school program to children (children with and without disabilities)

Language-rich School Environment
Data shows that the School Program and Environment is designed that every place facilitates language learning opportunities. These designs are Steps in Collaborative Team-Based Action Plan for Designing and Implementing Language-Rich Home Environment and equipping parents through Parents Education Program.

Developed a Learning Culture. The School-wide collaborative Team develops a set of principles governing oral language in the classroom that will translate into principlebased to functional everyday practices. The philosophy should define language, state why language is important, and identify how language is supported in the classroom.

Setting up the learning environment and spaces. The team identifies and organizes the indoor and outdoor learning spaces to maximize language enhancement. props, costumes, books, puppets and other sensory materials are displayed systematically to help stimulate a conversation to children. The team asks for community supports through donation of recyclable materials and props to be developed in creating language rich-environment in school setting and also to model to parents how to set up the same environment at home.

Collaborative Teaching. The team (teachers, administrators, parents and caregivers) who are involved with the preschoolers in the classroom are committed to contribute in a systematic, consistent way to the language richness of the classroom indoor and outdoor. Collaborative as a tool for School Wide Campaign to ensure quality adultchild conversations, all team members should have training on adult-child interaction techniques that maximize children's language growth. Team members can mentor each other in indoor and outdoor classroom for quality implementation.

Design a Daily Language Plans Monitoring and Evaluation integrated in daily functional activities. The team develops a set of objectives for the whole year for linguistic content, form, and use integrated in all sensory activities, playful science, Math concepts and functional language for daily use. Developed a list of target vocabulary based on their level.

Equipping the Stakeholders
Parents' Education Program. This program is provides a system and a model of effective model parent-child relationship which includes principles as well as techniques.

Collated data shows that Parent Education Program plays a vital role in children's development to children with and without special needs it is important that parents fully understand their role as the first hands-on educator. The following are the list of seminars and workshops they are required to attend and implement; The Important Role of the Family and Dynamics of Partnership with the school; Orientation of How the Brain Works; Orientation on Reading Pyramid Skills ; Personalized Home Program (Language –Rich Program); and Parents Education Program (Discussion of Home Program).

Parent's Workshops. The following workshops on developmentally appropriate materials and activities for Parents and Caregivers helped us achieve a learning stimulating environment are; Workshops on Facilitating Developmentally Appropriate Language Skills for Parents and Caregivers, Home Visit and Setting – up of Language Rich Home Environment, Parts of the House Labelling Indoors and Outdoors, Things we used at home, Establishing a Reading Nook at home and list of toys/manipulatives they can use at home To efficiently and effectively implement this program parents/ guardians and caregivers are required to attend the PEP (Parent Education Program) which empowers them through lectures and seminar workshops. These sessions develop parents' competencies as "stewards of the health of their children's learning". Knowledgeable, skillful parents and facilitators that help stimulate and support the whole child's learning and development.

Caregivers Program. This program was designed for caregivers to understand their important role in providing support in creating a language rich-home program and the whole child's development. In the Philippines not only affluent families have caregivers/yayas for their children since most middle class families are composed of two parents working a caregivers presence is a normal characteristic of a Filipino family.

In Mindhaven School, almost 90% of students have caregiver especially pre-school children. Since they are the hands-on caregivers of enrolled in Mindhaven, they are considered to be vital partners of the program because they spend more time than the parents. They are required to develop their knowledge, values, attitude and skills to be

empowered to implement the home-based program. These trainings also helped some caregivers to be qualified as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) and domestic helpers in other countries.

Home Visits. This is to check the quality and quantity of stimulation and support available to a child in the home environment. The focus is on the child in the environment and the child as a recipient of inputs from objects, events, and transactions occurring in connection with the family surroundings. Teachers are tasked to identify the home environment inventory to check how it can be possibly transformed into a Language Rich- Environment, what and how support can answer the need of the whole child development.

Home- Based Program. Guided by the neuroscience findings, the school offers Personalized Home-based Program in reference to the child's Individualized Education Program carefully designed so that the Functional Curriculum and Early Literacy and Numeracy can be implemented and monitored by the child's first teacher- parents. School-Home Partnership in setting up Language-Rich Home Environment combined by the homelink activities and learning kit from school creates highly motivated parents and learning-rich stimulating home where language encompasses these early years intervention for kids with and without disabilities.

School – Home Partnership
Setting up the Language –Rich Home Environment based on our Individualize Educational Program focused on Language- Rich Environment Program by Establishing Reading Nooks (Indoor and Outdoor), Labelling things/toys outdoor and indoor, Music and Movement Area, Sensory Areas Indoor and Outdoor (Kitchen, Garden and bedroom) to provide sensory experiences that meet the needs of toddlers to kindergartens and Regular home visit by highly qualified mentors

Homelink Kits are multi-sensory materials and activities designed based on the interest and skills of the child where parents at home connect with the child's learning in school and reinforce it at home. This will support the child with the help of the parents understand that all things are connected from school, home and community.

Perception of parents on language-rich home-link program perceive their child's home to be a "Real Book" environment

Active Participation
"We found out that the "real books or concrete things" make them remember recall those things easier and faster before they are exposed to abstract concepts. With concrete things they can see, touch, hear, taste, and experience. Now we understand the multi-sensory approach and we can see that with continue exposure to environment where actual learning is taking place the child has a better understanding of his environment."
– Parent
Parents participated in creating a language rich home by displaying alphabet with different sizes and with attractive color so that when the child wakes up he is exposed to it. So they're doing to make it more as a school- with things around it as a real book. This way the child is not forced to learn but he is learning because it is just a usual activity for

the child and the "play and learn it's a normal as daily activity. This builds up the curiosity and interest in things and letters around him and eventually the desire to read.

Parents' realization of language-rich home and school program to be a crucial goal in their child's literacy development during preschool years.

Belief and attitudes in the program
"I realize that our language print- environment has been helping the child to develop fast. Maybe if not because of the program – it will take another year for him to learn what he has learned now. We don't need to force our child to learn anything because he enjoys learning. He has a momentum in learning and it is "we" the parents who are now challenged to match his habit of learning." – Parent

The effectivity of the program depends on our PEP attendance, consistency of applications at home with the dedications of the parents. Daily exposure to language rich environment resulted to a facilitative learning without pressure. Moreover the follow-up to "outdoor environment" like church, etc. shows that children apply what he learns to where he can.

Parents and professionals involvement and support on language-rich home and school program.

Commitment and Dedication
Commitment and dedication of teachers and parents' engagement support and cooperation reflected in Parent Education Program Attendance. The full Implementation of Home Program: Language Rich- Home Environment Program, Behavior Management, Life Skills and Social –Emotional Program) by parents who are empowered through workshops and trainings. Parents' collaboration and cooperation through attending workshops in materials production to be used at home and their attendance in Feedback Sessions for progress monitoring and evaluation show their support in this program. They also update themselves in our School Social media Facebook (closed group) for updates and articles that supports parents in developing children. Home visits and Caregiver's training help secured a rich environment for learning at home.

Conclusion
The research showed that both the school and the families created meaningful Language –Rich Home School Program – with and without disabilities. In the creation of their learning environment, there is an emphasis on the role of parents in the development process acknowledging their critical role in facilitating the acquisition and application of the language. This is the continuation of the school program by transferring lessons learned in school to similar simple to complex environment. The parents and caregivers become aware of what is expected of them in monitoring assessment and evaluation of the learning process. Abreast with this is the continuous learning process for the parents and caregivers from attending Parents Education sessions where they learned more in the importance of knowing the physiology of the brain so that they can adjust to the profile of their child's learning style, to the kinds of materials to be utilized, even to the use of appropriate word since they serve as model of children in words, actions and attitudes.

Streamlined Home Environment was also set-up to build the learning space for functional curriculum like Routine and Behavior Management. This confirms the vital role that the home plays in early literacy. More than this physical set-up of the learning environment, a large part of the active ingredients in the development that's having an influence is the quality of the relationship the child personally experience with the parents/caregiver. Thus equal attention is assigned to the social-emotional development of children to develop passion in learning, while developing early literacy/ LanguageBased Program. This puts into practice the Neuroscience findings that positive or negative emotions are embedded in the architecture and the function of the brain.

Parents take into consideration factors that ignite a passion for learning in young children, because science shows that children can't help but want to learn about what's going on around them and the parents and teacher's job is to provide an environment which each child can pursue his or her development as far as it will go. Role of the School in meeting a Language –Rich Home Based Program

The school serves as the training center to empower parents to operationalize the framework of the language rich-home environment. Trainings through seminars and workshop were conducted which develop their skills in identifying the needs of the child and planning or processing language materials from whatever materials they have at home. It was free education for the parents and also a venue to strengthen the parent's support system which had created a "sub-culture" in school, family and community.

Based on the framework of the program strategies like Home Visits, Routine Building and Behavior Management, Formulation of Individualized Education Program, IEP meeting, Creation of Interest and Skills appropriate homelink kit feedback and planning assessment and evaluation discussion were focused on necessary operational mechanism supporting actions to achieved learning objectives and target skills.

Learning Spaces of children are the real places in the community where children learn their lesson in the actual environment. This way, children will understand the concrete environment of the lesson and not just in the textbooks. Children in Real Books explore, experience, and engaged themselves in Real Learning. Upon the establishment of the language home link program, the parents realized that their homes can be real book environment which is supporting the whole child development approach of the school. Just like in school their home, is created also to be a learning space which is healthy and safe, where they experience support and challenges, while being engaged in the learning process. The Real Book Environment reflects the integration of the culture from school to home and in the community. These environments are the direct reflection of the culture and behavior of the adult who are taking good care of their children.

These environments require students to be prepared to learning conditions. Which in turn reflect of the condition of the real world even at the early age. Children then are provided with people and learning tools that enable them to develop their fullest potential. They are guided to reconnect to their communities and their own diverse resources, they are active participant and become deeply engaged in their own learning. Likewise, these allow the children to know the natural world, themselves, their families and communities.

This coordinated and collaborative school and home partnership is an intentional system to produce life-long learners who are thoughtful creative culturally competent intellectually curious and civically engaged. The success of these programs is the common purpose and responsibility of all adults, not just educators.

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