

Building Literacies Together: Enhancing Literacy through Family Engagement for Diverse Learners

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of a family literacy initiative across Michigan's Great Lakes Bay Region, focusing on its influence on home literacy practices, school readiness, and engagement among diverse families. Data from literacy nights and post-event surveys reveal significant shifts in reading behaviors, parental confidence, and inclusive practices for families of children with disabilities. The study supports the broader literature that emphasizes the value of intergenerational learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and accessible family-school partnerships. Implications for policy, practice, and research underscore the need to embed equity-centered family literacy into educational infrastructure.

Introduction

Children's earliest literacy experiences often begin at home. Family literacy, defined as the integration of adult and child learning experiences within the family context, has emerged as a cornerstone of educational equity [1]. It views parents and caregivers not only as supporters but as co-educators whose involvement critically shapes early learning trajectories. According to Chaney (2014) [2], intergenerational literacy strategies are especially vital in low-income African American households, where educational systems have historically underdelivered. The Michigan-based initiative discussed here reflects a growing national movement to bridge the home-school divide by equipping families with literacy tools and strategies, emphasizing community empowerment and inclusion.

This paper presents findings from a study of a regional family literacy initiative in Michigan. The initiative addressed a pressing need: in the Great Lakes Bay Region, only 31.1% of children read proficiently by the end of the third grade, compared to the state average of 41.6%. Nearly 10% of residents lack a high school diploma, and household incomes are significantly below the state average. Against this backdrop, the initiative aimed to strengthen intergenerational pathways and promote equitable literacy outcomes by positioning families as key partners in addressing regional literacy disparities.

Literature Review

Family literacy centers on the belief that literacy is nurtured through intergenerational, relational experiences [1]. As families are children's first teachers, literacy development begins long before formal schooling through shared reading, storytelling, play, and routine interactions. In contexts with economic or educational disparities, family literacy initiatives can mitigate early learning gaps and support long-term academic trajectories [3,4]. Family literacy encompasses four foundational elements: parent-child literacy interaction, parent training as teachers, adult literacy support, and age-appropriate child education (NCFL, 2023). Morrow and Young (1997) [5] and Jordan et al. (2000) [6] emphasize the effectiveness of integrated family literacy models in enhancing vocabulary,

phonological awareness, and narrative skills in young learners. Additionally, home-based engagement fosters consistent reading routines, which in turn improve cognitive and language development (Morgan et al., 2009; Cairney, 2003) [3,7].

The role of family literacy is even more pronounced in marginalized and multilingual communities. Smythe et al. (2022) [8] note that parenting interventions in low- and middle-income settings have a measurable effect on school readiness and emotional development among children with disabilities. Pang et al. (2020) [9] advocate for the use of cultural brokering, emphasizing that literacy programs must reflect the cultural contexts and identities of the families they serve.

Prendergast (2016, 2018) [10] extends this discourse by documenting how public libraries serve as critical literacy ecosystems, particularly for children with disabilities. She finds that when librarians and parents collaborate, especially in underserved communities, children experience increased inclusion and access to print-rich environments. Lynch and Prins (2021) [11] similarly emphasize the need for educators to develop pedagogical tools that are responsive to diverse family structures and needs.

Hean et al. (2024) [12] and Zhang et al. (2025) [13] confirm that family literacy programs improve language acquisition, reduce caregiver stress, and promote positive educational and psychosocial outcomes in children with developmental delays. These benefits extend beyond academic performance, influencing long-term family cohesion and empowerment.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative design [14] to evaluate the impact of family literacy events on home-based literacy practices among families in Michigan's Great Lakes Bay Region. Data collection utilized a revised version of the Home Learning Environment Questionnaire [15], which contained 12 Likert-scale items (1 = "every day", 5 = "Hardly ever") measuring the frequency of specific literacy and parent-child activities. Surveys were distributed before and after

participation in literacy events. Additional demographic questions captured the child's age, disability status (e.g., Early Intervention, Preschool Special Education), and program enrollment (e.g., Head Start, tuition-based preschool). Data were collected from 13 literacy events held between Fall 2022 and Spring 2024, hosted by teacher candidates from Saginaw Valley State University. The events were designed to be inclusive, hands-on, and culturally relevant, offering meals, read-alouds, phonemic awareness stations, and take-home books. Surveys were completed by 257 families (duplicated count) representing over 850 individuals across eight counties.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each survey item. Pre- and post-event means were compared to identify shifts in family behaviors (e.g., reading together, letter recognition, shared routines). Responses were also disaggregated to explore potential differences between families with and without children receiving special education services. Open-ended comments provided qualitative insights into participant experiences, which were thematically reviewed to inform interpretation.

Results & Key Findings

Findings from the family literacy initiative demonstrated measurable and meaningful improvements in home literacy behaviors and family engagement. Across both survey and qualitative data sources, families reported increases in the frequency and quality of shared literacy practices, enhanced parent-child interactions, and greater parental self-efficacy. These outcomes were especially salient in households with children receiving special education services through Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Quantitative results indicated that following participation in structured literacy events, over 70% of families reported reading

to their children at least four times per week, compared with significantly fewer at baseline. Families also reported more frequent use of interactive strategies such as dialogic reading, phonemic games, and letter-learning activities. Pre- and post-survey comparisons using the adapted Home Learning Environment Questionnaire supported these trends, showing incremental yet statistically significant gains. For example, the mean score for “doing activities with your child that help them learn letters” improved from 1.87 to 2.00, while parent-child play increased from 1.48 to 1.60 (on a 1-5 Likert scale, with lower scores indicating higher frequency). While these shifts may appear modest, they represent movement toward more consistent, intentional literacy routines, a significant outcome for families in high-need, low-resource communities.

The analysis also revealed spillover effects into broader domains of the home learning environment. Families reported modest increases in outdoor exploration, art activities, and daily routines, such as pet care, suggesting that literacy events catalyzed more holistic family engagement in learning. These findings reflect not only increased literacy activity but also strengthened relational dynamics within families.

Subgroup analysis revealed both convergences and distinctions. Families of children with IEPs reported not only academic gains but also behavioral improvements, aligning with prior evidence that inclusive literacy experiences support both language and socioemotional development [12]. Notably, no meaningful gaps in participation or behavior changes emerged between families with and without children receiving special education services, underscoring the accessibility and inclusivity of the program. Program design elements such as sensory-friendly stations, multimodal materials, and flexible activity options likely contributed to this responsiveness.

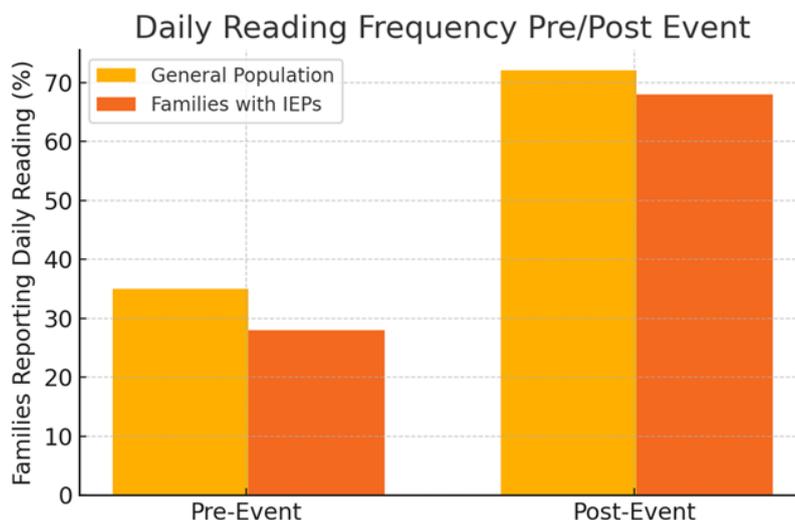


Figure 1. Changes in daily reading frequency before and after literacy events.

Qualitative data provide rich contextual detail. Caregivers described feeling more motivated to engage in shared reading, expressed appreciation for the take-home literacy resource, and valued the age-appropriate, hands-on learning opportunities. Feedback also surfaced areas for refinement, including requests for more transparent pre-event communication, age-specific breakout sessions for older siblings, and enhancements such as small incentives or more detailed instructions at activity stations. Notably, these suggestions reflected a desire for deeper engagement rather than disengagement, highlighting both the feasibility and the scalability of the model.

Taken together, the results suggest that community-based family literacy events, when intentionally designed with developmental and ecological principles in mind, can serve as catalysts for strengthening communities facing systemic economic and educational barriers. Even incremental behavioral shifts hold the potential to yield long-term academic, social, and emotional benefits. These findings align with prior research on the value of sustained home-based reading interventions for oral language and comprehension development [6]. They underscore the importance of ongoing investment in inclusive, localized

literacy strategies as well as longitudinal research to examine their durability and broader impact.

Discussion

These results support the theoretical framework that places family at the center of a child's literacy journey. As Lynch and Prins (2021) [11] suggest, literacy is not merely a school-based endeavor—it is cultivated through daily routines, storytelling, and shared experiences. Families reported feeling empowered, particularly those who had previously felt marginalized by traditional education systems.

Importantly, culturally responsive engagement strategies played a critical role. For example, meal sharing during events lowered participation barriers, and bilingual books ensured accessibility for multilingual families. Pang et al. (2020) [9] stress the importance of cultural brokering in engaging diverse populations—an approach effectively modeled in this project.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings underscore the importance of integrating family literacy into public education systems. Policymakers should consider allocating funds to sustainable, community-led literacy initiatives that promote long-term benefits. Teacher education programs should include coursework on family engagement, and school leaders must ensure that literacy programming reflects the diverse linguistic and cultural makeup of the communities they serve.

This study is significant in three ways. First, it addresses a critical research gap in the intersection of family literacy and disability inclusion, offering insights into how families with and without children receiving special education services experience and benefit from shared literacy programming. Second, it extends scholarship on informal learning environments, demonstrating how family engagement can be cultivated outside traditional school structure, particularly in under-resourced regions with low adult literacy and early reading proficiency rates. Third, by involving pre-service teacher education students in the design and implementation of literacy events, the initiative models a sustainable, replicable framework for embedding family engagement into educator preparation.

In addition to fostering inclusive and responsive literacy-building opportunities, future programs must also prioritize accessibility, including providing transportation and ensuring that activities accommodate individuals with disabilities. Libraries, early childhood centers, and schools should work collaboratively to form literacy ecosystems that are inclusive and continuous across age groups.

Conclusion

The Great Lakes Bay Family Readers initiative demonstrates how thoughtfully designed community-based literacy events can cultivate meaningful shifts in home learning practices—especially when rooted in relational, inclusive, and developmentally responsive frameworks. This study reframes family literacy not merely as an educational supplement, but as a dynamic system of interconnected supports that shape a child's lifelong relationship with literacy. By centering families as co-educators and leveraging the leadership of pre-service teachers, the project illuminates a sustainable pathway for improving literacy outcomes across diverse early childhood populations—including children with special education needs. It also offers a replicable model for how higher education institutions can

partner with communities to bridge early learning gaps through strengths-based, culturally responsive programming.

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