

Research Agenda

The mission of the Goodling Institute is to improve family literacy education through research and its application to practice through professional development. Furthermore, the Goodling Institute provides national leadership to support and maintain high quality, integrated programs for families with educational needs. A one-time federal appropriation to The Pennsylvania State University College of Education established the Goodling Institute in 2000 to honor the retiring U.S. Congressman Bill Goodling for his diligent efforts in enacting the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program legislation in 1989. Penn State's College of Education was selected as the host organization because of the long-standing initiatives of the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy in family literacy. The National Center for Family Literacy is a partner in the Goodling Institute and is charged with carrying out specific activities toward accomplishing the Goodling Institute's three goals: research, professional development, and advocacy for policies that support family literacy.

This research agenda is intended to guide Goodling Institute faculty and staff in crafting research projects and grant proposals that will both serve the field and contribute to academic scholarship. The research agenda topics build on current scholarship in family literacy and parent involvement in education, with particular attention to gaps in research and practice, and emerging trends such as immigration, digital literacies, and international family literacy programming. It also reflects the new policy landscape, namely the elimination of federal funding for Even Start family literacy programs and reduced state family literacy funding. In turn, the research agenda can inform legislation and guide policy development. The principles that inform the research agenda are explicated below.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The research agenda:

- Conceptualizes family literacy in two ways: (1) *what families do with literacy in school and out-of-school settings, such as home and community* and (2) *programs or activities that seek to enhance the educational and literacy development of adult caregivers and children, and parent involvement in children's education*. This distinction is based on scholars such as Anderson et al. (2010), who write:

As others have pointed out, 'family literacy' connotes different things for different people; for some, it means intervention programs usually aimed at low-literate or marginalized families while for others, it encapsulates the myriad ways that literacy is practiced and promoted within the context of the family. (p. 33)

This dual focus will enable us to include a wide array of research participants and research sites that can provide insights into family literacy.

With the defunding of federal Even Start programs and declines in state family literacy funding, research on family literacy needs to focus not only on traditional family literacy programs such as the four-component Even Start model (adult education, parent education, early childhood education, and interactive parent-child literacy activities), but also on parent involvement initiatives and adult basic education (ABE) and workplace education programs that incorporate a family literacy emphasis. For the purpose of this research agenda, “family literacy programs” and “family literacy initiatives” refer to any program, project, class, workshop, or intervention that aims to help parents support their children’s education. These may be sponsored by schools, libraries, adult education programs, community-based organizations, or other entities.

- Conceptualizes literacy as a social practice that includes not only reading but also writing, numeracy, digital literacies, and emerging types of literacy, all of which are intertwined with oral communication. Furthermore, viewing literacy as a social practice elucidates how people use literacy skills to achieve different goals and purposes, including but not limited to educational advancement for themselves and their children.
- Is based on an expansive notion of family that includes not only mothers (the focus of most family literacy research studies) but also fathers, siblings, grandparents, custodial parents, other adult caregivers, and extended family members. These extended family relationships are a primary setting for the development of language, literacy, and numeracy.
- Is focused mainly on younger children (birth to elementary grades) but also may include research on family literacy and parent involvement in the education of older children such as adolescents.
- Recognizes the need for diverse research methods to answer different kinds of questions.
- Recognizes the need for longitudinal research.

RESEARCH TOPIC AREAS

1. Family interactions focused on literacy and numeracy

Rationale: Research consistently points to the important role that families play in supporting their children’s language and literacy development. Over the years, research has shown a relationship between children’s success in early reading and:

- Parent-child story-book reading
- Parents’ explicit teaching of literacy skills and abilities,
- Parents’ general interactions with their children around print, and
- Parents’ own reading and interest in books (Paratore et. al, 2010).

Family literacy programs are a means by which practitioners can develop interventions that focus on the relationship between children’s early literacy skills and parent-child interactions. Further research is needed to learn about the types of interventions that will enhance children’s language and literacy development as well as improve the families’ overall learning success. In addition, we need to better understand how families currently use reading, writing, and numeracy in out-of-school settings such as the home and community. This information, in turn, can inform the development of programs and initiatives that incorporate and extend families’ literacy and numeracy practices.

Sample research questions:

- Which types of guidance and training best equip adult caregivers—especially struggling readers and writers—to support children’s language, literacy, and numeracy development?
- Which types of language, literacy, and numeracy skills do adult caregivers most easily and effectively teach to children?
- What types of parent-child interactive literacy activities best support children’s language, literacy, and numeracy development?
- How do family literacy interventions (e.g., shared book reading, Adult Child Interactive Reading Inventory) shape, integrate, and/or deviate from participants’ home literacy practices?
- How do educators’ and families’ cultural beliefs about literacy and education shape their interactions, the design and implementation of family literacy initiatives, and the ways in which families respond to these initiatives?

2. Relationship between family literacy and human capabilities

Rationale: Prior research indicates that participation in family literacy programs leads to multiple types of benefits—not just academic but also social, psychological, and economic—and can enable participants to improve their lives in various ways. The human capabilities framework is a useful way to conceptualize the multi-faceted ways in which program participation may shape family literacy participants’ ability to live a more fulfilling life. Developed by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the human capabilities approach asks what a person is able to *do* and to *be*. The central human capabilities are as follows, with bold font denoting those capabilities that are most relevant to family literacy:

- life
- **bodily health**
- bodily integrity
- **senses, imagination, and thought (e.g., academic and literacy outcomes)**
- **emotions (attachments to things and people)**

- **practical reason**
- **affiliation (includes relationships with others, and self-respect and dignity)**
- concern for other species
- **play**
- **control over one's political and material environment**

Due to gender and socio-economic inequalities, many family literacy participants do not have access to the support needed to fully develop these capabilities. Thus, future research should examine whether, how, and under what conditions participation in family literacy and ABE programs expands or limits participants' human capabilities, including literacy learning, mental health, access to social support, employment, ability to advocate for their family, health literacy, financial literacy, and other domains. That is, what does program participation allow them to do and to be?

Sample research questions:

- How does participation in family literacy initiatives enhance or diminish adults' and children's human capabilities? (For instance, how does participation influence parents' ability to advocate for their family's interests in and outside of school settings?)
- How do families use the skills developed in family literacy programs to enhance their lives (e.g., as family members, community members, workers)?
- What are the unintended consequences of developing language and literacy skills and being involved in family literacy initiatives (e.g., resistance by male partners, changed relationships with peers), and how can these be mitigated?
- How do family literacy initiatives equip adults to help children be successful in and outside of school?
- How can family literacy initiatives enhance communication between adult caregivers and education professionals, and create opportunities for parents to become involved in their child's education and to assume leadership roles in school and community settings?
- When parents do assume leadership roles and advocate on their children's or family's behalf, what are the consequences for the families and institutions involved?
- How have funding reductions affected the provision of ABE and family literacy services?

3. Language and literacy practices and educational experiences and outcomes among immigrant families

Rationale: Immigrant families bring different socio-cultural understandings of parenting, education, and family that align differently from mainstream U.S. cultural practices and ideologies (Gadsden, 1996). These differences can affect outcomes for children and families (Paez, Paratore Bock, & Pizzo,

2011). Further research examining home literacy practices; cultural perspectives; interactions among schools, teachers and immigrant families; and adult and child second language and literacy development can inform the development of appropriate and effective family literacy programs and interventions that target language and literacy development of all families.

Sample research questions:

- In what ways can family literacy initiatives best support the language and literacy development of immigrant families?
- What instructional practices are effective in supporting this development in multilingual and multicultural settings (e.g., Spanish-speaking families from different countries and with different cultural practices; families speaking various languages and from various cultures attending the same classes)?
- How do immigrant families use their home language to promote reading, writing and numeracy in out-of-school settings such as home and community?
- How do educators' and immigrant families' cultural beliefs about literacy and education shape their interactions, the design and implementation of family literacy initiatives, and the ways in which immigrant families respond to these initiatives?
- What program models are available to promote immigrant families' literacy in their first language while supporting English acquisition?
- What are the specific experiences and outcomes of immigrant families with respect to research questions in other topic areas?

4. Role of digital learning and digital literacies in family literacy

Rationale: With rapidly emerging technologies such as social media, smartphones, e-books, and the Internet, literacy practices and instruction have come to encompass much more than reading and writing words in print. Digital literacies entail the “representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools” (O’Brien & Scharber, 2008, p. 67). “In multimodal composing and reading, ideas and concepts are represented with print texts, visual texts (photographs, videos, animations), audio texts (music, audio narration, sound effects), and even dramatic or other artistic performances (drama, dance, spoken word)” (O’Brien & Scharber, 2008, p., 66). For instance, many low-income adults with limited schooling communicate with others through texting, e-mail, and Facebook; they may also participate in family literacy or adult education programs through distance learning.

As digital technologies become more widespread, affordable, and accessible, they are profoundly shaping what, how, and where people learn (Warschauer, 2007), including how families use literacy and the topics and modes of instruction in family literacy programming. Family literacy

research should investigate how digital technologies impact language and literacy development, interactions within families, and the educational programs in which families participate.

Sample research questions:

- How are digital technologies reshaping the ways in which families learn and use literacy? How are digital and other types of literacy inter-related?
- What are the benefits and challenges that families and that programs encounter in using various digital literacies, and how can the benefits be extended and the challenges addressed?
- How are digital literacies incorporated into family literacy instruction, and how does this shape programmatic and participant outcomes?
- How does the use of digital literacies shape human capabilities ?

5. Professional experiences and development of family literacy and other educators

Rationale: Professional development (PD) is integral to family literacy program quality. It is a mechanism for professional and personal growth for early childhood and adult educators, program administrators, and other professionals who work with parents and children in settings such as Early Head Start, Head Start, and K-12 schools. PD provides opportunities for practitioners to learn new administrative or teaching practices and to modify existing practices to best meet participating families' needs. These families are educationally and economically vulnerable, may be culturally diverse, and perhaps speak a language unfamiliar to educators. Few pre-service or educational opportunities exist for administrators or teachers to learn and understand the complex issues facing these families, and if PD is offered, it is typically of short duration (i.e., workshop) of varying quality (Strucker, Snow, & Pan, 2004). Further research is needed to learn about the PD offered to educators to ensure high-quality experiences that will lead to improved program quality.

Sample research questions:

- What professional development opportunities are available to family literacy practitioners or other educators, and to what extent do these opportunities include a focus on the needs of educationally and/or economically vulnerable families?
- How do practitioners identify and use resources and strategies to support their professional development and to make changes in their practices?
- What types of professional development (e.g., coach-based, action research, online, individualized versus group settings) are most effective for educators and administrators in family literacy programs and parent involvement initiatives?

- What PD topics are important to propel family literacy into the future (e.g., building administrators' knowledge and skill in areas such as creating and maintaining effective partnerships to support family literacy within the educational infrastructure and across community systems; supporting an environment that embraces cultural diversity; teaching basic skills using relevant texts useful to adults in various family, community, and work contexts)?

6. *Intergenerational (family) literacy and parent involvement in international settings*

Rationale: Family literacy programming, once thought to be unique to the United States and the United Kingdom, has seen a burgeoning interest that includes both implementation of programs and research on the international level. For example, UNESCO held a world symposium on family literacy; Education for All monitoring reports contained sections on family literacy; international research journals, and scholar and practitioner groups have formed dedicated to the topic of parent engagement; and some European countries have begun parent engagement and family literacy initiatives to assist with the integration of immigrant families. Comparative or program-specific research on international programs can inform family literacy practices both locally and globally; researchers and practitioners can learn about diverse program structures and effectiveness. As U.S.-based family literacy programs continue to serve large numbers of immigrants, international research can offer a better understanding of immigrant background, needs, and appropriate programming to best serve these families. Lastly, conducting and sharing research on an international scope can create a stronger political base to promote family literacy as a viable vehicle for adult and child education.

Sample research questions:

- What are the key similarities and differences in the conceptualization and implementation of family literacy initiatives throughout the world?
- How do international family literacy initiatives and policies inform family literacy in the United States and vice versa?
- How do migration and immigration patterns influence implementation of family literacy initiatives and family involvement in children's education, and more specifically, language and literacy development?

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