THE PRESENCE OF TEXT AND FAMILY SCHOLARLY CULTURE: RAMIFICATIONS FOR LOW-INCOME AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STUDENTS AND SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

by

Allison N. Branch

An Abstract
of a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Students from low-income homes and students who speak a language other than English encounter literacy struggles that can affect their learning during the K-12 years. These struggles may be linked to two factors: the absence of family scholarly culture (FSC) at home, which involves meaningful discussion and activity related to text, and the absence of text for students to read. What follows is a discussion of research concerning the effects that the absence and presence of FSC and text have on the learning gains of students from low-income and English language learning backgrounds, as well as a discussion of how school librarians can promote the development of FSC and increase students' access to text.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Much has been documented concerning the academic struggles faced by students from low-income homes and homes in which languages other than English are spoken. There is also a significant body of research discussing the impact that access to text and frequent reading has on the growth of literacy and academic success. The problem facing educators who work with such students is how to connect this information in a way that helps them have academic success during their formal education.

This research paper examines the significance of increasing low-income and English language learning students' access to text as well as the resources that support family scholarly culture (FSC). It also considers how school librarians may partner with students and families to promote the increase of FSC as well as access to text.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review the literature concerning the impacts that both the absence and the presence of FSC and access to text have on low-income and English language learning students in grades K-12. The research paper consists of an examination of the struggles that low-income and English language learning (ELL) students have in the classroom and how they are correlated with the absence of text and family scholarly culture, the effect that FSC and the presence of text in the home can have on such students, and how school librarians can help families fill the void of FSC in these students' homes to promote academic success.
Questions Guiding the Study

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is family scholarly culture (FSC)?
2. What are the negative effects on low-income and ELL students when there is a lack of FSC and reading resources?
3. What positive effects occur when low-income and ELL students experience an increase in FSC and reading resources?
4. What can school libraries do to help families build scholarly culture?

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include the availability of peer-reviewed journals and articles from those with the right qualifications and expertise in the areas researched. Data was collected from journals and articles regarding studies of FSC, access to text, and literacy interventions with students from low-income and English language learning homes.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are frequently used in the research paper:

Family scholarly culture: “[A]n everyday, routine set of practices and preferences that are engaged with material objects (books, in this case) and with activities (reading, talking about books, using knowledge)” (Evans 3). Includes both textual materials and meaningful activities involving those materials, led and reinforced by adults in the home. Abbreviated as FSC.

Text and reading resources: Books, articles, and other material utilizing the written word, either in print or electronic form.
Design of the Study

The research study collected previously published information pertaining to FSC, access to text in low-income areas, the influence of the school library upon literacy for low-income and English language learning students, and suggested activities that school librarians can implement to promote the increase of FSC and access to text.

Articles were accessed through the online database collection of the James C. Kirkpatrick Library through the University of Central Missouri. Databases used include Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts with Full Text; Academic Search Complete; Education Research Complete; and Consumer Health Search Complete. Search terms included “low-income” and “literacy,” “poverty” and “text access,” and “English language learning” and “literacy.”

Conclusion

This research study includes three chapters examining how FSC and access to text can improve literacy skills and academic performance for students from low-income homes and who speak languages other than English at home. The following chapter is a review of the literature. Chapter three consists of answers to the research questions posed in chapter 1, as well as a discussion of the conclusions of the research and recommendations for K-12 librarians regarding the implementation of the research concepts.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Proficiency in reading is a fundamental key to academic success. However, students in low-income homes and students who speak languages other than English often have less access to text or meaningful experience with text than their more affluent peers or peers who speak only English. The research in this literature review explores how both the presence of text and a family scholarly culture (FSC) in a low-income or English language learning student's home can have a positive impact on his or her academic gains during the K-12 years. What follows is an examination of the struggles that low-income and English language learning (ELL) students have in the classroom and how they are correlated with the absence of text and FSC, the effect that parental support of text in the home can have on such students, and how school librarians can help families fill the void of FSC in these students' homes.

The Correlation between Academic Struggles of Low-Income and ELL Students and the Absence of FSC

Students from low-income homes and students who speak languages other than English often face academic challenges. A correlation exists between these challenges and the absence of text or a family culture of literacy. Defining what family scholarly culture is and examining its absence will explain why it is vital for students’ literacy and academic success.

The term “family scholarly culture” (FSC) was coined by M.D.R. Evans and her research team in their 2010 study of families, the number of books in their homes, and children’s educational gains across twenty-seven nations. The team defined FSC as “an
everyday, routine set of practices and preferences that are engaged with material objects (books, in this case) and with activities (reading, talking about books, using knowledge)” (Evans 3). Therefore, FSC includes both textual materials and activities involving those materials. Evans and her team went on to explain what FSC provides to children during their formative schooling years: “Books and reading are a concrete resource and indicate a cognitively complex way of life that enhances intellectual capacities in ways directly useful in school, improving academic performance” (3).

With this working definition of FSC, Evans and her team presented their argument in defense of their study: first, that parents who engage their children in FSC will give their children educational advantages; second, that the greatest educational gains occur in families that start with a limited family culture and increase it; and third, that poorly educated parents who maintain FSC experience have positive effects in their children’s educational gains (4). Their findings and significance will be addressed later within the literature review.

For students who speak Spanish at home, there are particular challenges to building FSC. Many have parents with limited educational experience and resources (Boyce 334; Evans 7, 10, 17-18; Krashen 17-18; Minkel; Naiditch 28). The lack of resources in regard to material belongings and technology in such low-income homes has been well-documented. The literacy culture of these families tends to be primarily oral and not written (Naiditch 28; Minkel; Peifer and Perez 765). It is common for these students’ parents to have a low level of education due to customary fees to attend high school in their home countries. This makes it unlikely that parents are reading to their children at home in either Spanish or in English. Not only this, but many students live
with extended family members, sometimes in overcrowded home situations, which can make learning difficult. As Boyce and her team noted in their study of migrant farm worker families, “...children living in these crowded conditions had lower verbal and cognitive scores compared with their counterparts living in uncrowded settings” (355).

Thus, students’ vocabulary development is directly affected by factors which contribute to the lack of FSC at home when they are young. Vocabulary development is related to the development of reading ability and an interest in reading. Consequently, young children with poor vocabulary development and little to no FSC at home are facing severe academic and literary challenges when they become students in school.

Not only is there a lack of high levels of parental educational attainment in low-income and ELL students’ homes, but printed and electronic text is often scarce and virtually nonexistent in the communities in which students live (Evans 7, 10, 17; Leavitt-Noble and Grande 10-11; Lindsay 85; Minkel). A study of four urban neighborhoods in Philadelphia, two of which were middle-income and two of which were low-income, found that access to children’s print resources in stores averaged 13 book titles for every 1 child in the wealthiest neighborhood and 1 book title (a coloring book) for every 300 children in the poorest neighborhood (Neuman and Celano 17). In another study of children’s access to text, Jim Lindsay adds that “children’s access to print materials plays a causal role in facilitating behavioral, educational, and psychological outcomes in children—especially attitudes toward reading, reading behavior, emergent literacy skills, and reading performance” (85).

Further emphasizing how lack of print resources directly affects academic achievement, Stephen Krashen’s studies on libraries and their effect on students who
live in poverty offer two contributions to this discussion. In one study, he examined four factors that have an influence on poor students’ reading scores on the NAEP: SES (socioeconomic status), school, the library, and SSR (sustained silent reading). The strongest predictor for how fourth graders would perform was social class; he goes on to explain that part of this is no doubt due to a lack of print resources in the homes of students in poverty (19). Part of a holistic defense against such a sobering fact is, according to Krashen, found in students owning more books and schools having better libraries:

Until poverty is drastically reduced or eliminated, schools need to defend children against the effects of poverty. This means providing nutrition, health care, a clean environment, and books. For policy, this means continued and expanded support for free/reduced meal programs, increased school nursing care, and, of course, improved school and classroom libraries (18).

In another of his studies, Krashen, Lee, and McQuillan explained that it is possible to predict with 89% accuracy students’ reading scores on the eighth grade NAEP by looking at fourth grade NAEP scores, SES levels, the amount of books in the school library, and the degree to which the public library is utilized (28). Thus, student access to and use of text bears significant weight in regard to student performance on this standardized test.

In summary, the absence of FSC, which includes both access to print and or electronic text as well as meaningful activities that utilize such resources, is an unfortunate side effect of poverty that negatively influences a low-income ELL student’s
learning gains in school. Although this is a dire challenge, it is not insurmountable, and can be mitigated through the introduction of text and inviting families to create FSC with that text in their homes.

**The Positive Academic Effects of the Presence of Text and Inclusion of FSC**

When there is FSC present in a student’s home, positive effects occur in students’ learning in the K-12 years of school. These effects can occur even when a student does not experience FSC consistently from birth. Research and anecdotal evidence show that when there is a presence of text and FSC in a student's home, his or her educational experience is intensified, and even reading ability can move up above a student’s current grade level.

As Evans and her team analyzed the data gathered in their study of FSC and educational attainment in 27 nations, they found that the presence of books in the home caused some significant gains for students:

Home library size has a very substantial effect on educational attainment, even adjusting for parents’ education, father’s occupational status, and other family background characteristics...Growing up in a home with 500 books would propel a child 3.2 years further in education, on average, than would growing up in an otherwise similar home with few or no books...This is a large effect both absolutely and in comparison with other influences on education...Thus, a home library is as important as parents’ education...Moreover a home library is twice as important as father’s occupation: only 1.6 years of education separates children of farm
laborers at the bottom of the hierarchy from professionals’ children at the top, all else equal. This is just half the 3.2-year home library gap. (3)

The researchers’ findings in regard to families who have little to no FSC predict what they expect as far as the amount of educational years their child will complete. A child coming from a home with zero books and with parents who had very little to no schooling can, according to Evans and her team, expect to complete 7.6 years of education during the K-12 years (10). If that same child’s family had come to own 25 books, that child’s years of education would have increased by over 2 years to 9.6 years, and owning 500 books would further propel that child along 2 more years in his or her education to 11.6 years. The grand total of educational years gained, as influenced by the simple presence of books in the home, is 4.3 years for the child who had zero books at home to begin with (Evans 10-11). While gains in academic years were present for students from families with higher income and more FSC, they pale in comparison to these gains. As Evans and her team conclude near the end of their report, “It is at the bottom, where books are rare, that each additional book matters most, not among the literate elite: each additional book yields more ‘bang for your book’ among the book-poor than among the book-rich” (17). Consequently, according to this study, low-income families who begin accumulating books and print resources in their home can expect to see moderate to large gains in their students’ academic performance over time.

Similar findings of academic gains due to an increase in FSC can be found in a study of migrant farm worker families, who often have little to no parental education and virtually nonexistent FSC. In migrant farm worker families, in which the home language
tends to be Spanish, the educational attainment of parents is low, and the income level and amount of resources are also low, introducing families to initiatory experiences in FSC can yield gains to students in the forms of English vocabulary acquisition and usage. A study done by Lisa Boyce and her research team studied whether an evidence based early language and literacy intervention known as SHELLS (Storytelling for the Home Enrichment of Language and Literacy Skills) would build students’ literacy skills. In the intervention, a group of parents and children worked together to create storybooks that told a family story. These books included drawings and some words. As the researchers explained it,

Children in the SHELLS group, compared with children in the comparison group, were significantly more likely to increase the number of total words and different words in the shared narratives from pretest to posttest. This increase in language production is particularly noteworthy because the direct focus of the intervention was to encourage parents’ behaviors to support their children’s language. The results for children’s language provide strong support not only for the intervention itself but for a conceptual model in which intervention activities that affect parent behavior can, in turn, effectively impact children’s language. (Boyce 362)

Increased language use was also found in another study of a parent-child reading initiative conducted through Head Start. Mary Ellen Huennekens and Yaoying Xu studied preschool students who spoke Spanish at home to discover if increased reading in Spanish as well as in English improved their language use in English. They found a slight positive correlation (Huennekens and Xu 24). Such a gain in language
may translate to gains in literacy if a study were developed to examine how these students performed in elementary school.

Another encouraging aspect of introducing FSC into low-income, Spanish-speaking homes is that many parents do have a desire to connect with their children’s schools and to help their children succeed academically. As Diane Barone explained, citing other studies, Mexican-American families often have space set aside at home for students to complete schoolwork. They tend to have positive attitudes about their children’s schools and want to give their children the right support they need to do well in school. Despite this, the language and literacy barrier between parents and their children’s schoolwork often make it difficult to support them adequately (Barone 378).

However, when parents have a chance to connect with their children by taking part in a classroom literacy project, the concept of FSC is introduced, and both students and parents benefit. A research project led by Sarah Harper, Amy Platt, and Janette Pelletier examined a parent-child literacy initiative to deduce whether students’ reading skills increased as a result of literacy activities with their families. This program, which met for 90 minutes once a week for nine straight weeks, yielded data that showed large gains in students’ understanding of the alphabet and the ability to make inferences while reading (1002).

Similarly, Diane Barone’s family literacy initiative showed qualitative evidence of growth in students’ literacy skills. Giving children the opportunity to read a book to their parents, complete literacy activities together in the classroom, and then take the book home to practice reading with their parents during the week gave families the opportunity to grow as readers and learners (380).
Results can also be seen on mandated standardized tests, as well as in qualitative observations of increasing sophistication of students’ reading choices. Justin Minkel, a teacher in northwest Arkansas, devised a plan to provide each of his 25 second grade students with a home library of 40 books over the course of one school year. He described how this plan provided positive impacts on his students’ reading and performance on a standardized test:

These 25 students made more progress in their reading than I have experienced with any other class...And they made this growth despite formidable obstacles to academic success—20 of the 25 are English language learners, and all but one live in poverty. The shift in the students’ home libraries reflects their growth as readers—the first book every child received was the picture book Where The Wild Things Are, and the 40th book was the novel The Lightning Thief, which is geared toward 5th and 6th graders. (Minkel)

Not only did Minkel’s students make growth on the mandated standardized test in his district, but they also made gains in their individual reading levels.

There is further qualitative evidence that students of all ages can recognize the value of FSC, particularly in regard to an interest in reading. Laurie Elish-Piper conducted informal interviews with elementary, middle, and high school students in her community to discover their impressions of their parents’ involvement in literacy. A few students from all age groups reported memories of parents reading to them, primarily in their younger years; however, nearly all of these students noted that this practice stopped once they became independent readers themselves (57). Despite the best
intentions of this practice, the students made it clear that they had enjoyed reading when their parents read to them: “Students indicated that when their parents did read aloud to them, it made reading interesting and a positive experience for them” (Elish-Piper 57).

In conclusion, the presence of text and FSC in the homes of low-income ELL students provides significant positive academic benefits for students and families. The school library is uniquely poised to encourage the growth of FSC, not only by giving students the opportunity to bring text home to read, but also by providing meaningful opportunities for students and their families to interact with text together.

**Increasing the Amount of Text and FSC**

Students who come from low-income homes where another language is spoken and FSC is limited are at high risk for academic struggle. However, the school library can offer help getting families to see this risk and engage in a partnership with families to build FSC, which will benefit students academically and personally. Various approaches have been taken with students of different ages to promote FSC. School librarians can take note of these approaches and tailor them to fit the needs of their students and students’ families.

Introducing the concept of FSC to families of very young children can emphasize the importance of reading to parents before children enter school. Such introductions can include distributing age-appropriate books, instructions for parents for how to read aloud to their children and engage in literacy activities with them. Family reading programs held in the library can also address the needs of these families. Karen Peifer and Linda Perez examined large early literacy programs that were aimed at low-income,
Spanish-speaking families with children less than three years old. These programs featured home visits and gift bags with board books that were given to families to keep. During the home visits, nurses or trained volunteers discussed the important of early literacy behaviors with parents. In one circumstance, a public library assessed parents’ literacy skills to place them in free adult literacy or ESL classes if appropriate, while also hosting reading programs for the families in which storytelling and reading to infants were the central activities (Peifer and Perez 769-770). The researchers concluded that “this coordinated intervention supports a consistent social message and has the potential to initiate very young children into the world of language, books and reading. It also educates parents about the significance of their behaviors which was the intended message” (Peifer and Perez 770).

Not only could an introduction to FSC include print resources and activities for instructions, it may also include oral storytelling shared by adults in the student’s family. Echoing Peifer and Perez’s emphasis on both members of a parental unit being involved in their children’s literacy development, Jackson Taylor examined the specific influence of a father in the development of literacy with particular regard to storytelling. He suggested that if a father cannot read or read well, storytelling is an entry level activity that can provide the bedrock of FSC, as long as the methods and delivery of the storytelling are properly understood (Taylor 62). Thus, a school library can offer reading programs tailored to give fathers and other male family members the chance to share family stories with their children, then have the children produce a print or digital version of the story for the family to keep. This would be very similar to the SHELLS program
that Boyce and her team used in the study of migrant worker families, which yielded positive gains in students’ vocabulary growth (Boyce 369-371).

A description of a program called Bookstart, which was utilized in Denmark in 2009-2012 to build literacy in the Danish language, sheds further light on how an early literacy program is introduced and maintained, as well as how it introduces families to the library. Families were selected for the program based on income level, and incidentally many of these families were immigrants from non-Western countries (Vestergaard 23-24). Four literacy packages were distributed to families by children’s librarians from the local public library. Lisbet Vestergaard described in detail how Bookstart works:

The librarians visit the families at home when the children are [between] 6 and 12 months old. The families can pick up the third package at their local library, typically in connection with a narrative event or a small concert. The last package is given to the child when joining kindergarten at three years of age. All the children in the kindergarten get the same book gift...Apart from picture books the children also get music-CDs, rhymes and jingle books and colouring [sic] books. The parents are offered supplementary lists with suggestions as to which children’s books are suitable for different ages. For some families Bookstart can therefore provide the first approach to the local children’s library. (24)

This description of Bookstart provides a glimpse into the methodology of early literacy programs. Traditional text and print resources are included, but these are supplemented by music and learning activity books. Also, the presence of the children’s
librarians in the literacy package distributions gives families the opportunity to learn about the local public library. Thus, early literacy programs like Bookstart, which contain a variety of literacy resources, underscore the already extensive research proving the effectiveness of early childhood education by giving qualitative evidence of how building FSC can have a positive impact on families whose children are at risk of struggling in school.

While Bookstart introduced low-income families to the benefits of the local public library, Mary Thweatt, a school librarian, orchestrated a parent-child literacy initiative in pre-kindergarten classes at her elementary school in Dallas, Texas to share the benefits of the school library. Over the course of the program, 50 families participated, including mothers, fathers, and other relatives, and Thweatt found that the amount of books checked out from the library doubled as families took home more books to read with their children (9). Thus the school library became an integral resource in the building of FSC among the families at Thweatt’s school.

Building FSC is not limited to in-school programs; it can be enhanced in a less formal way through “school-to-home literacy bags.” Working with older elementary children, Kimberly A. Leavitt-Noble, a school librarian, and assistant Marya Grande created a “school-to-home literacy bag” initiative at their elementary school. By fundraising first, they were able to buy the materials for the bags. These materials included word games, storybook kits, audio versions of books, graphic organizers, multi-sensory writing materials, a printed copy of the alphabet, and multiple writing materials. Parents were surveyed before the program and after to discover their perception of the school-to-home literacy bags, then they were invited to a night program in which the
initiative was fully explained. The parents’ reviews of the program were overwhelmingly positive (Leavitt-Noble and Grande 10-11). This suggests that similar programs, if properly organized, might be well received by students’ families and may be less taxing on librarians and school staff than interactive programs implemented in the school.

Learning from students themselves also sheds light on how to improve literacy struggles at school and at home. Rachael Howard is a middle school teacher who set out to interview her own ELL students to gain insight into their personal assessments of their reading struggles and what might help them overcome those struggles. She concluded that they needed vocabulary and phonics support, the chance to converse about reading, help with building meta-cognition while reading, and the chance to participate in meaningful literacy events (Howard 114-115). Getting to choose what they read from the selection available at the school library and having parent involvement in reading at home were two motivational factors that many of her students mentioned (Howard 125-126).

Motivation to read and motivation to share reading experiences were the key factors in a study of struggling high school readers conducted by Jo Lynn Suell, Donald Ratchford, Tammy Cook, and Holly Cost. The researchers implemented a program in which students used e-readers to read text (as opposed to print books) and were mentored by college students who read the same book that they were reading. The students’ scores on two reading tests increased and they reported more positive attitudes toward reading at the end of the study (80). While electronic resources may be more difficult for low-income families to attain than print resources, the correlation between students’ motivation to read, motivation to share with their college student, and
their performance on standardized tests may influence families to consider purchasing e-readers or other devices to enhance their FSC.

Seeking to make FSC and the enjoyment of reading accessible to students of all ages with profound and multiple learning disabilities, Daniela and Duncan Mercieca concluded the following about working with text and families: “...books do not have to be conventionally read to be enjoyed; information and stories do not have to be conventionally understood in order to learn from them; stories do not have to be conventionally written down in order to convey meaning...” (55). Their research examined how adding music and other learning activities to print resources made literacy accessible to students who do not possess the mental faculties to read independently. It also revealed how, with some guidance from literacy experts (such as teachers or teacher-librarians), families can take the lead in providing literacy-rich experiences for their child.

To build FSC, the school library can take the lead in empowering families to promote literacy for their students. As the area of the school with the largest collection of reading resources, it is primed and ready to initiate contact between parents and teachers, as well as to promote literacy activities that the whole family can enjoy. Text can be printed or electronic as long as it is accessed by students extensively at home, preferably with family members. Not only will FSC activities be helpful to students in the mainstream classroom, but researchers recommend they be made available to all students, regardless of ability.
Conclusion

Students from low-income homes who speak other languages often face academic challenges at school, especially in reading. Although their families desire to provide them the right support to increase their reading ability, a lack of resources makes this extremely difficult. However, the presence of text and a “FSC” in a low-income or English language learning student’s home can have a positive impact on his or her academic gains during the K-12 years, and can be initiated by the school library.
CHAPTER 3
CONCLUSIONS

The research questions that drove this literature review are the following: What is FSC? What are the negative effects on low-income and ELL students when there is a lack of FSC and reading resources? What positive effects occur when low-income and ELL students experience an increase in FSC and reading resources? What can school libraries do to help families build scholarly culture?

The academic difficulties that low-income and English language learning (ELL) students have when there is no FSC or easy access to quality reading material are profound, but the positive effects on such students that come from an increase of FSC, as well as the presence of text in the home, are monumental; and school librarians can partner with families to build FSC and provide access to reading resources that boost students' literacy skills.

The Definition of FSC

“FSC” is a term used by M.D.R. Evans and her research team to describe “an everyday, routine set of practices and preferences that are engaged with material objects (books, in this case) and with activities (reading, talking about books, using knowledge)” (Evans 3). FSC includes both textual materials and activities involving those materials which are led by parents or caregivers. Such FSC provides intellectual stimulation to children during their formative years which will play out as they go through school: “Books and reading are a concrete resource and indicate a cognitively complex way of life that enhances intellectual capacities in ways directly useful in school, improving academic performance” (3).
In 2010, Evans and her team carried out a study of various families, the number of books in their homes, and their children’s educational gains across twenty-seven nations. Using evidence from their research, they argued that parents who engage their children in FSC will give their children educational advantages; second, that the greatest educational gains occur in families that start with a limited family culture and increase it; and third, that parents who maintain FSC experience, even when they were poorly educated themselves, can see positive effects in their children’s educational gains (4).

**The Negative Effects on Students Due to a Lack of FSC and the Presence of Text in the Home**

Poverty influences how low-income students perform in school. Because formal education depends on literacy, students must demonstrate increasingly sophisticated literacy skills to be proficient; and low-income students usually lack the FSC and access to text that builds such literacy skills. To wit, in their study of FSC and presence of text in 27 nations, Evans and her team found that a child who grows up in a home with no books and is raised by parents with very little or no formal education can expect to complete just over 7.5 years of school (10), making it through half of the seventh grade.

One hallmark of poverty is the access to children’s and young adult literature, which tends to be scarce in the city where many low-income students live. According to a study of four urban neighborhoods in Philadelphia, two of which were middle-income and two of which were low-income, access to children’s print resources in stores averaged one book title (a coloring book) for every 300 children in the poorest
neighborhood (Neuman and Celano 17). A lack of access to text makes it difficult for families to build FSC.

For students who speak languages other than English at home, there are even more challenges to building FSC. Parents often have limited educational experience and resources and live in overcrowded home situations. Limited educational experience often means limited vocabulary development, which is correlated with the development of literacy and an interest in reading. Students live with extended family members, sometimes in overcrowded home situations, which can create a challenge for families to carve out time to read with their children. As Boyce and her team noted in their study of migrant farm worker families, “...children living in these crowded conditions had lower verbal and cognitive scores compared with their counterparts living in uncrowded settings” (355).

Stephen Krashen’s studies on libraries and their effect on students who live in poverty further underscore how poverty affects low-income students’ reading. In one study, he examined four factors that have an influence on poor students’ reading scores on the NAEP: SES (socioeconomic status), school, the library, and SSR (sustained silent reading). Students’ SES was the strongest predictor of how students would perform, which, as he goes on to explain, is partially due to a lack of print resources in the homes of students in poverty (19).

The Positive Effects on Students that Accompany an Increase in FSC and the Presence of Text in the Home

The presence of FSC and text in the home have been shown to boost a low-income student’s academic achievement while he or she is in school; whether FSC or
text have always been present or recently introduced does not negate the positive effects on the student. As mentioned earlier, a child who is raised by uneducated parents and has little access to books can expect to complete just over 7.5 years of school (Evans 10). If that same child’s family accumulated 25 books, that child’s years of education could increase over 2 years to 9.6 years, while a dramatic increase of 500 books would further propel that child along at least 2 more years in his or her education to 11.6 years. Thus, by simply adding volumes of text to build FSC, a low-income student can gain over 4 years in his or her learning, even if the parents remain uneducated (Evans 10-11). Low-income families who increase the amount of books and print resources in their home can expect to see moderate to large gains in their students’ academic performance over time, even if they start doing this when their child is already in school.

Another encouraging aspect of introducing FSC into low-income homes is that many parents do have a desire to connect with their children’s schools and to help their children succeed academically. Parents can have positive attitudes toward working with schools to boost student achievement, particularly in low-income homes where families speak Spanish. Diane Barone explained that these families often hold positive attitudes about their children’s schools and want to give their children the right support they need to do well in school, making sure that students have space set aside at home to complete schoolwork (378). Although the language and literacy barrier between parents and their children’s schoolwork often make it difficult to support them adequately, when parents have a chance to build FSC by taking part in a classroom literacy project, both students and parents benefit.
Sarah Harper, Amy Platt, and Janette Pelletier examined a parent-child literacy initiative to deduce whether students’ reading skills increased as a result of literacy activities with their families. This program was arranged in 90 minute sessions once a week for nine weeks; and by the end of the program, the researchers found gains in students’ understanding of the alphabet and the ability to make inferences while reading (1002). Diane Barone’s family literacy initiative also showed qualitative evidence of growth in students’ literacy skills. Giving children the opportunity to read a book to their parents, complete literacy activities together in the classroom, and then take the book home to practice reading with their parents during the week gave families the opportunity to grow as readers and learners (380).

School Librarians and Their Role in Promoting FSC

The school library can become a strategic resource for families who suffer from a lack of FSC and access to text. In particular, the school librarian can become a “literary liaison” as he or she informs families of the studies regarding FSC and creates pathways for them to build FSC with their student. Such pathways include access to free books to build home libraries, take-home literacy bags, and family reading programs, among other opportunities.

Karen Peifer and Linda Perez examined large early literacy programs in hospitals that were directed toward low-income, Spanish-speaking families with children less than three years old. These programs featured home visits and gift bags with board books. During the home visits, nurses or trained volunteers discussed the important of early literacy behaviors with parents. In another circumstance, a public library assessed parents’ literacy skills to place them in free adult literacy or ESL classes if appropriate,
while also hosting reading programs for the families in which storytelling and reading to infants were the central activities (769-770). The researchers concluded that such programs display qualitative evidence that families receive the message that literacy is important and can be cultivated when children are young (770).

When children are older and in elementary school, borrowing books from the library and having clear instructions on how parents can use them further builds FSC. Kimberly A. Leavitt-Noble, a school librarian, and assistant Marya Grande created a “school-to-home literacy bag” initiative at their elementary school through fundraising and investing their time to meet with families twice during the initiative. The bags were full of materials such as books, word games, storybook kits, audio versions of books, graphic organizers, multi-sensory writing materials, a printed copy of the alphabet, and multiple writing materials, along with instructions for what parents could do to deepen their child’s reading experience. The parents’ reviews of the program were overwhelmingly positive (10-11). Literacy bag programs can emphasize the importance of literacy while also reminding students and families of the resources that build FSC which are readily available in the school library.

A school library can offer reading programs tailored to give specific family members the opportunity to take a hands-on approach to building FSC. In his examination of how fathers and other male family members are involved in their children’s literacy development, Jackson Taylor examined the specific influence of storytelling. Even if a father is uneducated, oral storytelling to his children can provide the bedrock of FSC (Taylor 62). Reading programs could meet in the library, giving family members a chance to read and tell stories with their student. Such reading
programs are similar to the SHELLS program that Boyce and her team used in their study of migrant worker families, which displayed data that showed growth in students' use of English vocabulary (369-371). Mary Thweatt, a school librarian, orchestrated a parent-child literacy initiative in pre-kindergarten classes at her elementary school in Dallas, Texas to share the benefits of the school library. Over the course of the program, 50 families participated, including mothers, fathers, and other relatives. Thweatt found that the amount of books checked out from the library doubled as families took home more books to read with their children (9). Thus the school library became an integral resource in the building of FSC among the families at Thweatt’s school. In conclusion, school librarians who serve students that are low-income and ELL can use these program examples to create their own methods of promoting FSC to students and families, not only to enrich students’ literacy experiences but also to promote academic achievement in a collaborative effort between school and home.
WORKS CITED


Huennekens, Mary Ellen, and Xu, Yaoying. “Effects of a Cross-Linguistic Storybook Intervention on the Second Language Development of Two Preschool English


