



Families, Language, and Equal Opportunities: Identifying Good Practices in Family Literacy Projects

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Abstract

It has long been known that children who grow up in situations of economic and social disadvantage tend to have more difficulties when they enter school, and that these are often perpetuated, leading to underachievement and disaffection. The role of the family and home environment in stimulating children's language acquisition and pre-literacy competences during their earliest years is clearly important. It is possible that with appropriate exposure and encouragement before the age of 3, children from disadvantaged backgrounds could start school on an equal footing with their more privileged counterparts. We provide a conceptual overview of the factors in the home affecting language and subsequent literacy development in children aged 0–3, and a review of programs designed to enhance the home learning environment.

Keywords Early childhood · Literacy · Language development · Family

Introduction

Research over the last fifty years has supported the view that the linguistic interaction at early stages in children's lives—usually within the family—is extremely important for their language development (Gilkerson et al., 2018; Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003), attitudes towards the spoken and written word (Brice-Heath, 1982) and future literacy (Dodici et al., 2003). The language interaction and literacy practices learned in the home help children not only to build a sound language base, but also to acquire more advanced literacy skills once they start school (Clark, 1976; Dicaldo & Roch, 2022; Mui & Anderson, 2008; Snow, 2014). In particular, children who are socialized into participating in rich, frequent, and diverse activities involving oral discourse as well as printed text within the home environment generally have an advantage in the early stages of education, which in turn has been found to favor their later school

performance. According to what is sometimes termed the “Matthew effect” (Stanovich, 1986; Walberg & Tsai, 1984), young children who lag behind their peers in their language development in the earliest stages of schooling are likely to fall further behind as they move up through the educational system.

The underlying factors that might explain the relationship between early language development and educational achievement have been addressed from various perspectives. Recent research relying on neurological and developmental evidence has confirmed that the brain undergoes massive changes in the first three years of life, which constitute the most intense period for language development (Brooks & Meltzoff, 2008). Moreover, as theorists on child language development have moved from a predominantly nativist-acquisitionist to a social, neo-Vygotskian model, it has become increasingly clear that children's mental development is driven by meaningful experiences and supported by social interactions. In metaphorical terms, Sparling (2004) explains the importance of early literacy experiences from 0 to 3 in terms of “emergent literacy”. In his words, the

moment of recognizing words on the page is no more the start of literacy than the start of a plant is the moment it breaks through the ground (...) the visible plant could not possibly survive and flourish if the underground parts were not a primary part of the plant and had not prepared the way. (p. 45)

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The theoretical basis for studies of home language and literacy practices and their bearing on children's subsequent educational progress thus lies in social constructivist theories of learning that explain how more competent others guide less experienced learners into participating in the cultural practices valued in their communities (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). Seen in this way, early language and literacy learning are part of the long socialization process that prepares children for formal education, and the people with whom children have contact are understood to help them, perhaps without any explicit intention, to acquire the necessary skills.

Unfortunately, this socialization process does not seem to develop in the same way for all children, since those from homes with lower socioeconomic status (SES) appear to engage in fewer or less appropriate home literacy practices (Burgess et al., 2002), have less access to reading material, and often score lower on measures of language development such as expressive and receptive vocabulary size. Such children are at a disadvantage when entering school, and often continue to underperform during the years that follow (Burriss et al., 2019). Although some studies have shown considerable variation within lower SES groups (Sperry et al., 2019), a strong effect of children's SES is a permanent finding in large-scale research, for example by that of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019). At the policy level, despite the recognition that families play an important role in children's language and literacy development, efforts focus on the creation of widely accessible ECEC provisions (Eurydice, 2019). Rather than trying to build on families' capital by identifying good practices in this area and then providing guidance for parents of pre-school children to support them through this stage (Wasik, 2012), the idea is that equal opportunities can only be guaranteed through institutionalized care such as in child care or kindergarten settings. This paper takes an alternative view, namely that families can be encouraged to adopt enhanced language practices in the home, leading to better outcomes at age 3. We review recent projects working with parents of children in the 0–3 age group that provide support and guidance for successful language and pre-literacy development. In what follows, we first consider the terminology used, and then explore previous researchers' findings concerning language and literacy development in home settings.

Terminology

Family Literacy

Two main terms are used to refer to the child's early literacy-related experiences in the home: “[Family Literacy](#)”

and “[Home Literacy Environment](#)”. In the North American context, the term “[Family Literacy](#)” emerged in the 1980s (Taylor, 1983) and gathered considerable momentum with the federally-funded Even Start Family Literacy Program, designed to integrate early childhood education within a broad program that also covered adult literacy and parenting instruction (Clymer et al., 2017). Subsequent scholars such as Wasik and Herrmann (2000) narrowed down their view of “[Family Literacy](#)” to “literacy beliefs and practices among family members and the intergenerational transfer of literacy to children” (p. 3), but still included extended and non-traditional families consisting of people who live together or maintain a constant relationship (p. 6). Confusingly, however, the term “[Family Literacy](#)” is also sometimes used for institution-based interventional literacy programs for young children in which families play a role, even though families may not be actively involved in the design and implementation of these programs (Hannon & Bird, 2004).

Home Literacy Environment

Papers from European countries make greater use of the term “[Home Literacy Environment](#)”, ostensibly a more inclusive term that could include regular visitors to the home, childminders, neighbors, etc., as well as the extended family itself. Researchers who use this term make no explicit distinction between “family” and “home” literacy: the main goal appears to be to avoid the word “family”, which might have political overtones for some. The term “environment” suggests a more descriptive approach, rather than implying interventional measures. Here, we use both terms with these slightly different meanings.

Aspects of the Home Literacy Environment (HLE)

Most researchers concur that at least three factors are critical in the HLE from 0 to 3, namely parents, parent–child relationships, and the home environment itself. Regarding the first, most attention has centered on mothers, who have traditionally been credited with teaching “the mother tongue” (Mace, 1998). The amount of talk mothers direct towards their children and the diversity of their vocabulary have been found to influence children's language and literacy development (Weizman & Snow, 2001). Similarly, mothers with a higher level of education and a more positive attitude to literacy activities have been observed to have children with higher language and literacy skills (Dollaghan et al., 1999). Conversely the role of fathers in family literacy development has often been neglected (Timmons, 2008), although a few studies analyze fathers' involvement (Karther, 2002). For example, Pancsofar et al.

(2010) found that fathers' education and vocabulary use were significantly correlated with children's language development at 15 and 36 months. Other members of the household clearly also have a role, and older siblings prove to be crucial agents in "brokering" language and literacy in the home (Perry, 2009), as do grandparents or other older relatives (Hendrix, 2000).

Concerning parent-child relationships, Dodici et al. (2003) found that the quality of parent-child interactions before the age of three was related to early literacy skills. Aspects taken into consideration included not only the child's own participation, but also the parents' language, the emotional tone of the interaction, joint attention, parental guidance, and parental responsiveness. Although none of these aspects on its own could be singled out as more important than the others, children from homes with a combination of these had stronger literacy skills when they started kindergarten (Dodici et al., 2003). Regarding relationships, Saracho (2002) also looked at parents' expectations and interest in ensuring that their children acquire literacy, which may condition their willingness to engage with written material: when older relatives give importance to reading ability, children conclude that this is valuable and strive harder to improve.

Finally, the HLE also has a bearing on the child's language and literacy development, particularly the availability of picture books (Burriss et al., 2019) and children's reading material, and the activities undertaken by family members at home related to literacy learning (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022; Snow et al., 1998). The age at which children first have any contact with reading material is also thought to be important (Sénéchal, 2012; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002): early years reading has been found to encourage vocabulary gains that led to greater levels of reading and increased growth in word knowledge (Frumkin, 2013). Other factors such as library visits (Sénéchal, 2012) or explicit parental literacy teaching (Sénéchal et al., 1998) may play a role. According to Saracho (2002), aspects such as songs, games, etc., encountered by the child in the home, or the linguistic landscapes surrounding the child, may also influence language and literacy development. At the same time, the child's own characteristics are also important. Not all children, even within one family, will be equally communicative or interested in reading, and their feelings about literacy activities may vary (Frijters et al., 2000). As Puglisi et al. (2017) point out, parents tend to adjust the literacy activities they do with their children as a function of their children's progress. Such factors affect the dynamics of home literacy activities and necessarily form part of the equation.

Types of Activity

Going more deeply into the HLE, researchers have also considered precisely what types of activity are undertaken in the household setting, and how beneficial these are for learning. This overlaps somewhat with the issue of relationships within the home mentioned above, but it is worth looking at this aspect in more detail in terms of concrete actions. Some previous studies have limited their operationalization of literacy activities to adults reading to children, which appears to be the quintessential home literacy practice. Parents usually use a richer and more complex language in shared reading activities than in other interactions with their children (Sénéchal, 2012), while small children also produce richer vocabulary when involved in playful reading activities (Hoff, 2010). However, it is clear that not all "reading together" is the same, and that the term "literacy interventions" covers a much broader range of activities than simply reading stories aloud (Anderson et al., 2010).

Concerning concrete activity types based on reading, it is important to make sure that they are engaging and enjoyable for children (Saracho, 2002). Marulis and Neuman (2010) explain that "storybook reading", in which a parent reads to the child, can be complemented by "repeated reading" of the same story, which is beneficial for reinforcing vocabulary, acquiring language structures and developing memory in general. Also useful is "dialogic reading", in which parents conduct a dialogue with children about the book "questioning, scaffolding dialogue and responses, offering praise (...), giving or extending information, clarifying information, restating information, directing discussion, sharing personal reactions, and relating concepts to life experiences" (DeBruin-Parecki, 2009, p. 386). Specific reading activities can provide ways for parents to expose the child to a wider range of language (Sénéchal, 2012). In psychological terms, parents should interact with children in literacy activities, recognise children's engagement, and act as role models in showing an interest in books and reading (Hirst et al., 2010). In addition to benefiting literacy acquisition as such, literacy-related practices also stimulate children's emotions and imagination, help them to acquire world knowledge, socialize them into more complex aspects of the culture, and convey values and ideals (Spedding et al., 2007). A further effect is to strengthen family relationships and improve communication (Swain et al., 2014).

Finally, beyond the world of books and the written word, the HLE also influences children's language development and oracy skills (Burgess et al., 2002). A rich and supportive home environment encourages more rapid and accurate acquisition of new words, greater phonological awareness, and a stronger understanding of the communicative potential

of language (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). Increased responsiveness from parents also proves beneficial for children's language learning (Landry et al., 2017), and the number of interactions children engage in with more knowledgeable caretakers has been found to be a central variable in language development (Romeo et al., 2018). Speech modeling in terms of both the quantity (e.g., number of words) and the quality (e.g., sentence complexity, lexical diversity) of the language that young children hear provides the foundation for later language and literacy skills (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015).

However, as was mentioned earlier, the HLE is shaped by the families' SES. Yet "the home learning environment is not predetermined; rather, it could be fostered" (Frumkin, 2013, p. 3). Dicataldo and Roch (2022), for example, propose that parents should be taught to shift from passive "reading aloud" to "dialogic reading" that involves the child by turning shared reading into a conversation, using various strategies to prompt responses, and encouraging the child to contribute progressively more. Anders et al. (2019) claims that families can be empowered if they are supported to use appropriate strategies to boost children's language. In an empirical study along these lines, Landry et al. (2017) found that parents could change their communication style towards greater responsiveness, and this benefited their children's learning. Dicataldo and Roch (2022, p. 15) conclude that "parent education is a pathway through which early childhood programs influence child outcomes". However, at this point we should also note that, as Saracho (2002) points out, there are serious issues surrounding styles of "literacy training" that attempt to get parents to adopt forms of communication that they would not naturally use, or expect parents to imitate teachers. If parents are to be "trained", then it is important for those responsible to be sensitive to the parents' issues or reactions and aware of possible cultural expectations or barriers. Otherwise such programs would have only limited uptake or might prove counterproductive. It is essential to learn from experiences in different settings, in order to envision what might be possible, and where the difficulties might lie.

Research Questions

In the light of this need to learn from existing experiences and in response to the absence of prior studies that bring together and systematize the available information about family literacy projects from 0 to 3, the present study investigates concrete measures that have been taken to support parents in creating a positive home learning environment. More specifically, our research questions were:

1. Are there any projects that try to improve children's language development at age 0–3 to create the necessary conditions for children's subsequent literacy development and academic achievement?
2. How are these language development projects designed and what good practices can they teach us?

Research Method

To answer the research questions, it was decided to use a systematic methodology, modeled on the methodology used for systematic literature reviews (Macaro, 2019). The first step consisted in identifying all the projects that focused on improving children's language skills as a means to improve future academic achievement through a review of the relevant scientific literature and an Internet search using keywords such as "early literacy", "language development" or "family literacy". A total of 19 projects were located (see Appendix) and analyzed. This first analysis revealed considerable variability in these projects, some of which were focused exclusively on teacher training or research. The search was therefore narrowed down, and the inclusion criteria were defined as follows:

Projects need to

- work with parents
- focus on language development
- address young children (0–3)

This second round of review left us with six projects that are briefly described below.

Characteristics of Family Literacy Projects

Even though the projects analyzed were selected according to rather specific criteria, they still vary greatly in the way they are organized as well as what they offer. Likewise, the information available online is very varied, sometimes making it difficult to gain a clear picture of the nature of the project. This is further complicated by the fact that some of these projects are rather general, with the specificities of the implementation left to the institutions responsible in the specific context where the project is implemented. What follows is a description that tries to do justice to this complexity in a few words, and this information is further summarized with the help of a table at the end of the section.

Lena Foundation (Language Environment Analysis)

The Lena Foundation, USA, which is the only commercial project described here, offers three programs directed at

- Early Years teachers (Lena Grow) through professional training programs
- Parents (Lena Start)
- Home visitors (Lena Home)

In all three programs the work centers on the evaluation of interactions in the school/home environment, particularly the number of “back-and-forth” interactions with children. These interactions are measured with the help of a “talk pedometer” technology, a recording device that is placed in a pouch on the children’s vest, and data are analyzed by the LENA software to draw a picture of the child’s talk environment. Since we tend to overestimate the number of interactions we engage in (Gilkerson et al., 2017), it is important to have an objective measure. The software quantifies the conversational turns between children and caretakers and distinguishes between child, parent and environmental (TV, radio) talk. Based on the outcomes, parents and Early Years teachers are trained in specific strategies to improve the number and quality of interactions.

The resources include an infographic for parents to understand why talk is so important (LENA, n.d.), another one explaining the importance of conversational turns, and 14 talking tips for parents translated into seven languages. For parents, the training “teaches parents brain-building talk skills by leveraging instructional videos, peer-group sharing, printed resources, and self-reflection” (LENA, n.d.). As well as closing the talk-gap and increasing kindergarten readiness, the program claims to help build strong families.

Longitudinal research carried out with 300 children between 0 and 3, and testing them again ten years later, suggests that “the conversational turns experienced early in life were predictive of children’s IQ, verbal comprehension, vocabulary and other language skills in adolescence” (Gilkerson et al., 2018). These authors state that the family environment is much more interaction-rich than child-care settings. The ideal number of interactions is 40 per hour.

FRIZ-Frühinterventionszentrum

This center for early intervention in Germany focuses on parents and teachers of children aged 2+ who show delayed language development. It offers therapy for these children, identified through checklists for pediatricians as part of the two-year check-up, and courses for parents of children with language delays, migrant children and children with autism as well as for kindergarten teachers or for professionals who

want to become “language mentors”. Some programs lead to officially recognized certification.

Parent training focuses on strategies for shared book reading and the identification of situations that could offer more possibilities for interaction. Parents are asked to videorecord their interactions with their children during free play to identify possibilities for improvement, and are encouraged to adopt some strategies such as getting on the child’s level to enhance communication. Parents whose children have been diagnosed with language delay tend to be concerned about this and need guidance as to how to redress the situation.

The center has created a number of infographics describing the different stages of language development and giving parents ideas for increasing their children’s exposure to language and opportunities for interaction. These infographics are available in 11 languages, thus addressing migrant parents, and are distributed through pediatricians.

The program has undergone extensive research with experimental and control groups; 98% of the participants in the training sessions would recommend them to other parents, and most felt that they were better able to engage in conversation with their children. All children were 2 years at the beginning of the therapy, and at age 2;6 differences between the experimental and control group were already noticeable. At age 3;0, 75% of the children had developed their vocabulary to age-appropriate levels, and at age 4 they had reached the level of normally developing children in grammar. These results were maintained when the children were tested again at age 5 and 7 (Buschmann & Gertje, 2021).

The Hanen Centre

This Canadian project offers training and certification for educators as well as courses for parents of children between 0 and 5 identified as having a language delay. The program includes a general course for parents who want to develop skills to promote their children’s language growth (It Takes Two To Talk), and more specific ones for parents of children under 30 months (Target Word) who show language delays, as well as for parents of children on the autism spectrum. The training courses are delivered by Hanen-certified speech pathologists, and include a number of parents’ meetings as well as some appointments with the speech pathologist. In one of these sessions the interaction between parents and child is recorded and then analyzed by the parents and the pathologist for feedback on the interaction.

The impact of these programs has been widely researched and information about the program evaluation is available on the center’s website (<https://www.hanen.org/Home.aspx>). The website also includes some tips for parents to build their interactions with the children as well as some fun activity ideas. The “Book Nook” section offers parents some book

recommendations and ideas for reading. Parents can also receive this information as a monthly newsletter through the email.

I Can

I Can is a Foundation that offers help for children who experience problems with communicating. They claim that 1 child in 10 (and 1 in 4 in deprived areas) struggles to speak and understand. To support these children they work with parents, the community and schools and nurseries, mostly through direct interventions in schools. The work with parents focuses on parents in areas of disadvantage and is carried out in collaboration with EasyPeasy and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), UK, under the name of “Changing the Conversation”. It is divided into different actions depending on the child’s age:

- **Babies: Parent Champion session.** The focus is on explaining how important it is to use talk right from the start and how important the parents’ role is for their children’s development. Parents come together in play-groups.
- **Tots Talking:** Targeted intervention for parents of two-year-olds to raise their awareness about the importance of their role. It includes practical activities.

They work through “Speech and Language Ambassadors” to reach those who do not easily get involved in such activities. These Ambassadors pass on the “Five Key Message” cards (I Can, n.d.) to family and friends in the community. For multilingual families, the cards have been translated into 10 languages, and there is a special card about “speaking more than one language” (Cambridge Bilingualism Network, et al., n.d.) developed in conjunction with Cambridge University’s Bilingual Network. One of the keys to success is, according to their website, that it is a free program. They also offer an app for parents (Easy Peasy) providing ideas for play with their children. The information about the app is sent by children’s nursery schools so that the source is trusted, and the activities suggested are done in school too, to establish continuation between home and school. Generally, the idea is to include more talk and play opportunities in everyday life. Parents also value the chance to gain more skills and resources to deal with their children generally.

There seems to be some evidence on the effectiveness of the program, but it was not publicly available.

Help My Kid Learn

“[Help My Kid Learn](#)” is a website developed by the Department of Education and Skills of the Government of Ireland as part of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and

Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020. This Strategy “envisages a central role for parents and communities in supporting and encouraging children and young people to learn to use and understand literacy and numeracy in their lives.” (Department of Education and Skills, n.d.). It defines three actions to support parents and the community:

- Supporting a national information campaign to build up awareness of the important role that parents and communities can play in supporting literacy and numeracy learning
- Providing better information to parents to enable them to support their children’s language, literacy and numeracy development
- Encouraging schools to work closely with parents and to support parents in helping their children’s learning (Department of Education and Skills, n.d.)

The Strategy clearly acknowledges the important role parents play in children’s educational achievement, informing parents about the role they play “using media, online resources and celebrity endorsements.” (Department of Education and Skills, n.d.) A website provides resources for parents about their role in fostering their children’s literacy and numeracy development, and ideas for encouraging the development of these skills according to the children’s age, divided into the skills of talking, playing, reading, writing and counting. The resources include materials from third parties, for example the Zero-to-three Foundation.

In a report about existing literacy programs, NALA, the agency that implements the Strategy, emphasizes that the participation in a family literacy program often leads parents with low levels of education to go back to learning. It mentions that family literacy programs have to adapt to the particular circumstances of the specific community and argues that among the success factors there is strong networking between the program and schools and community services, a small allowance for parents to cover extra costs of participating in the program (e.g., childcare), and the fact that training sessions for parents took place during school hours, when children are not at home.

Vroom

Vroom, launched by the Bezos Family Foundation, USA, takes evidence from research about the importance of interaction during the first five years of a child’s life, and transforms this into five actions that foster children’s language development, their executive control and the relation between parents and children. The idea is not for parents to have to find time to do new things, but rather to do the things they are already doing differently, so that they have a greater impact on children’s brain development. The five

steps Vroom recommends are Look (at what the children are looking at and comment on it), Chat (sing, talk and play), Follow (the child's lead, as this is the time when the children get engaged most), Take Turns (make your talk, play and exploration interactive) and Stretch (by asking open-ended questions and maintaining the interaction a moment longer than the child would).

Based on these five prompts, Vroom offers print-out tips for activities, an app with 1000+ tips for activities, videos, etc. and a text messenger that sends parents text messages every week. All the tips, independently of their format, are related to the underlying science through an easily understandable explanation (Vroom, n.d.). They also have a Facebook page and a YouTube channel. This is the only program that relies exclusively on providing parents with information and ideas, rather than creating spaces and occasions for exchange and training.

Discussion

This paper reviews the six family literacy projects that met our criteria, all of which are contextualized in English-speaking countries (US, Canada, UK and Ireland) and Germany. The absence of comparable programs elsewhere seems to reflect a lack of awareness of the importance of the parents' role in children's language development and/or a greater trust in early childhood education centers as the context in which this language development should take place. In fact, as mentioned above, the European Commission, as a driver of educational policies in Europe, does not envisage family literacy initiatives and instead centers its attention on the provision and quality of early childhood education and care.

The programs analyzed all acknowledge the importance of talk for children's language development and further academic achievement. In line with recent research, the focus is mainly on the number of interactions children are engaged in (Landry et al., 2017; Romeo et al., 2018). Other elements

Characteristics of the Reviewed Projects

	Directed at	Offers training workshops for parents	Resources offered	Evaluation of impact available	Age of children	Involvement of community in design or delivery	Special attention to multilingual families	Others
LENA	Parents, teachers, and home visitors	Yes	Print	Yes	First few years of life; not specified	No	No	
The Hanen Centre	Parents, educators	Yes (language delays, autism)	Specific sections of the website Newsletter	Yes	0–5	No	No	Offers professional development and certification for educators
FRIZ	Parents and teachers	Yes	Print	Yes	2+	No	Yes	Offers certification for teachers
I Can	Parents, schools, nurseries	Yes (Changing the Conversation)	Print App	Not possible to locate	Babies Tots (2+)	Yes (speech and language ambassadors)	Yes	
Help My Kid Learn	Parents and communities	Yes	Media Online resources Website TV series	Yes	0–12 in age ranges (0–2; 3–4; 5–7; etc.)	Yes (adaptation to context)	No	Small monetary allowance for parents Training during school hours to make attendance possible
Vroom	Parents, teachers, communities, educational administrations, etc	No	Print App Video	No	0–5	No	No, but comes in two languages (English and Spanish)	

in communication, such as making eye-contact, following the child's lead and singing, for example, are therefore also given importance. All the programs are thus based on insights from research on the importance of talk and use these to justify the activities recommended for parents. This is mostly done through infographics that summarize the results of research in easy language, but in the case of the Vroom program the intervention includes an explanation of the effects of the tasks proposed in text messages sent to parents each week.

By extending the focus of the intervention beyond increasing the number of words, the programs also claim to have an impact on strengthening family relationships (see also Swain et al., 2014) and helping parents with a lower educational level to return to formal education themselves. The focus of most programs thus moves beyond fostering children's school readiness and consequent academic achievement to improving family well-being and educational level in general.

A further characteristic that lies at the root of the programs' success is the fact that they work in collaboration with trusted community members such as nursery schools, pediatricians, or nurses (Anders et al., 2019). The fact that the source is trusted makes parents more open to getting involved in such programs. One program (I Can) works with community members as ambassadors who spread the word in the community and encourage other parents to participate. This seems to be a crucial element for success, as this kind of intervention is mostly directed at parents whose low level of education or migrant status pushes them to the fringe of society and often makes them wary of institutions in general, and even more of educational institutions. Given the difficulty of reaching these parents, using trusted intermediaries seems to be an important strategy.

As regards the tools used in the interventions, in most projects this is a combination of parent workshops and some kind of support material that gives parents specific ideas about how to improve talk at home. The parents' workshops offer training to parents and provide communities where they can exchange experiences, discuss their concerns and generally receive personal support. As for the materials, while in some cases print materials such as fliers are used (e.g., FRIZ, I Can), several projects use digital media (websites, text messages, apps), to share ideas with parents and ensure regular input, so that their efforts to improve their child's linguistic environment are sustained over time. Most interventions focus these "tips" on different activities such as shared play, singing together or book reading, but also offer more general guidelines for making the most of everyday situations to increase interaction with the children, such as getting on the child's level, establishing eye contact or following the children's lead and focusing on what interests them at the time.

Two projects (FRIZ, I Can) acknowledge the special needs of multilingual families, and all coincide in encouraging parents to use their mother tongue with the children, which is particularly important in situations of social disadvantage (Anderson et al., 2017; Burris et al., 2019). To reach out to families with different languages, some materials are translated into different languages (FRIZ, I Can), particularly print materials. Digital materials are provided in English and Spanish as they are mostly produced for the US, where Spanish is the heritage language for a large proportion of immigrants.

Finally, projects such as Help my kid learn stress the importance of adapting the interventions to the specific characteristics of the context and the target groups. This does not mean that successful programs cannot be transferred to other contexts, but it is a call to ensure projects fit contexts, to improve uptake. One such adaptation, which could be applied in other projects, is the small allowance paid to participants in this project to cover the costs of childminding, for example, so that parents are free to attend workshops and parents' meetings. No other project analyzed incorporated this feature, but some other solutions were found to allow parents to participate in workshops, such as organizing them at times when children were in school or offering childcare during the parents' meetings. Except for LENA and the Hanen Center, participation in all the projects is free which, again, is one of the keys to their success. All these factors are crucial to ensure parent participation (Hannon & Bird, 2004) and achieve maximum benefit among the disadvantaged groups where such projects are most needed, with a view to working towards greater equity in education for all.

Recommendations

The analysis of the six family literacy projects allows us to recommend good practices for the design of intervention programs intended to improve parents' strategies to foster their children's language development:

1. Base the design of family literacy projects on research findings from the field
2. Share insights from research with the parents participating in the intervention to make them aware of its importance
3. Involve trusted community members (nurses, teachers, social workers, etc.) in the project
4. Involve members of the community the program is aimed at in the design of the program and in making it known
5. Combine parent workshops with multimedia resources that give parents practical ideas of how to implement what was discussed in the meetings

6. Stress the value of the heritage language and encourage families with an immigrant background to use their heritage language with their children
7. Adapt the programs to the particularities of each target group and context

Conclusion

After reviewing the literature, this article analyzes six family literacy projects designed to provide parents and carers with strategies to foster pre-school children's language development with a view to boosting their subsequent literacy education. All of them are based on insights from research and most have been evaluated with good results that go beyond increasing children's school readiness to include such aspects as parents' increased confidence in their role as educators. Given these positive outcomes, it is surprising to find so few initiatives of this kind, and a certain invisibility of the existing initiatives among the European Commission's attempts to create equal chances for all. The huge potential of families to shape the conditions for their children's future success and reverse the negative deterministic effects of family background is underexploited: this evidence shows that children from less privileged backgrounds can be given the same opportunities by their parents if they in turn are supported.

Appendix

Complete list of projects reviewed

Name	Internet site
Lena Foundation	https://www.lena.org/
RICE UNIVERSITY Susanne M. Glasscock School of Continuing Studies	https://glasscock.rice.edu/
Vroom	https://www.vroom.org/
I Can	https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/
Talk With Me Baby	www.talkwithmebaby.org
FRIZ—Frühinterventionszentrum	https://www.fruehinterventionszentrum.de/
Early talk boost	https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/training-licensing/programmes-for-nurseries-and-schools/early-talk-boost/
Help my kid learn	https://www.helpmykidlearn.ie/
County Clare family learning	https://familylearning.ie/
Parenting 24Seven	https://tinyurl.com/mt8dhsn3
Sprache macht stark	https://www.biss-sprachbildung.de/btools/sprache-macht-stark-offensive-bildung-buch/

Name	Internet site
At home in language	https://www.rotterdamuas.com/research/projects-and-publications/urban-talent/social-inclusion/at-home-in-language/project/
BRISE	https://www.brise-bremen.de/ ; https://www.drk-bremen.de/angebote/familien/opstapje/
BIKS	https://www.uni-bamberg.de/biks/
The Pambazuka Project	https://brycs.org/promising/0045/
Sing, Talk, Read (STAR)	https://www.dclibrary.org/star
Reach out and read	https://reachoutandread.org/
Ready Rosie	https://readyrosie.com/
Hanen Centre	https://www.hanen.org/Home.aspx

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