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Parents' Experiences on a Family Literacy Program in Finland

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we investigate a family literacy program called *Bedtime Story Shelf*, which is an application of lending libraries. In *Bedtime Story Shelf*-program the families are loaning books from ECE centers and schools to homes. In the study, we present parents' prior (N = 122) on this program and its relation to families' prior literacy practises. According to the results, almost all the families took advantage of the *Bedtime Story Shelf*-activity. However, about half of the families loaned books from the shelf more often. These families also evaluated the activity as more meaningful. They felt that loaning libraries enabled them to expand their knowledge of children's books and made the children more active in family literacy events. These positive effects did not depend on the prior literacy practises of the family. This means that if we get the families involved in family literacy programs of ECEs and schools, they will find them beneficial. According to the study, one of the key objectives would be motivating the children and involving the parents. Furthermore, the educators should be active and flexible in their attempts to involve all the families.

Keywords: Family literacy, family literacy programs, literacy engagement, loaning library.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy and literature education offer valuable tools for social-emotional learning, academic skills, and coping with life in general (Aerila *et al.*, 2021). Rosenblatt (1994) emphasizes the potential of literature for enhancing our understanding of others and ourselves. Through literature, children from different backgrounds can make connections and empathize with each other (Kauppinen & Aerila, 2020). Howard's (2013) study reveals how children's voluntary literacy is motivated by entertainment as well as stress relief and obtaining reassurance regarding their feelings and experiences. According to Morrow (2016), children motivate themselves to be involved with books and literacy for pleasure and information. Best *et al.* (2020) investigated children's literacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that children value reading as an escape from harsh reality, as a means of feeling comforted, and as an opportunity for reflecting on and coping with negative emotions. This implies that cultivating the reading habits of families corresponds to providing children with a skill for life.

The literacy skills of individuals continue to grow from a young age. The initiation of young children into literacy

practices in home environments depends on the interests, attitudes, abilities, and uses of the written language of parents and other family members. Parents, often mothers, are children's first reading teachers, and they socialize their children as readers with their own beliefs, practices, and knowledge. This happens through everyday activities as well as through communication with their children (Rizk, 2020). According to Fox (2002), by reading daily with children, we enhance their development, peace of mind, and attachment between the children and us. Children's enjoyment of reading begins at home, and this is where they first grow to love reading (Duursma *et al.*, 2008).

In Western countries, in particular, families have at least some literacy practices of their own. According to Ledger and Merga (2018), almost all parents (98.7%) read aloud to their children at least occasionally. Previous research (Duursma *et al.*, 2008) reveals that the support from families in establishing literacy practices is one of the most important aspects among high-risk children in low-income families, where there are parents with little education and who belong to a minority group. For these reasons, these children are less likely to be exposed to frequent and interactive shared reading. In general, not all children are given

equal opportunities to be engaged in reading and literature in a home environment. For example, certain parents struggle to find time for reading with their children and are unsure of how to create reading moments. This does not necessarily imply that parents do not regard reading positively (Ledger & Merga, 2018). Families are different, and there are varied reasons for the lack of literacy practices as well as literacy routines in certain families (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2021). Further, they may have had negative experiences of reading during their own childhood, may have reading disabilities, may be ignorant, or may be faced with a lack of reading materials (Khanolainen et al., 2020). Therefore, support from ECE and schools is crucial to developing family literacy practices; it is important to have agents who function as reading advocates and facilitators of read-aloud opportunities (Ledger & Merga, 2018).

This article is a part of the Stories Makes Readers (StoRe) project. StoRe aims at creating research-based approaches to the pedagogy of reading engagement and the joy of reading (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2020; Aerila et al., 2021). The pedagogical approaches in StoRe are developed and tested in teacher networks in Finland. In this article, a family literacy program called Bedtime Story Shelf is investigated. Bedtime Story Shelf is a variation of a lending library. It is a box containing approximately 25 children's books and is located in the corridor of a school or ECE. The aim of Bedtime Story Shelf is to support families' literacy practices by providing them with reading materials in an easily approachable way. The study aims to illustrate the lending library as a family literacy program from the perspective of parents. The data for the study were collected via an online questionnaire after each Bedtime Story Shelf intervention in ECE centers or schools during the years 2018–2021. In Finland, there are not many family literacy programs and investigating the current programs as well as developing them further is crucial from the perspective of giving children equal opportunities for reading and the benefits of reading.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Family literacy programs are activities in which family literacy is supported, increased, or developed by ECE, schools, or other official bodies (Hanon & Bird, 2004). In many countries, family literacy programs support families in their attempts to create reading moments and acquire engaging literature for children at home. They are often based on the observations of the teacher and take advantage of teachers' experiences and guidance on how to engage children with literacy activities at home (Meyer et al., 2016). However, the benefits of family literacy programs go beyond reading engagement and literacy skills. For example, shared book reading with parents motivates children to participate in reading outside of school and subsequently supports children's growth in language and literacy skills (Meyer et al., 2016). In addition, family literacy programs often motivate parents to engage in reading, give them the confidence to support children in other school-related assignments, help them to be more involved in their children's lives, and create opportunities

for families to be together (Kauppinen & Aerila, 2022; Neyer et al., 2021).

In general, family literacy programs have several positive outcomes. According to Barrat-Pugh and Maloney (2015), the most positive impacts are parents' *confidence in sharing books with their children, increased interaction and communication with their children, and the recognition of the importance of sharing books*. Family literacy programs have a deeper meaning than merely imparting reading as they promote children's understanding of the world, their social skills and their ability to learn coping strategies (Duursma et al., 2008). Fox (2002) describes family literacy moments through attention, bonding, and communication. This implies that enhancing family literacy practices also encourages conversations and discussions between children and their parents and provides children with evidence of their parents' love for them.

Family literacy programs are usually implemented by teachers who have the desire to influence young children's interest and increase their engagement in reading. At best, family literacy programs complement the literacy practices already present at home and benefit all the participants: children, parents, and the teachers themselves (Meyer et al., 2016). In several countries, family literacy programs are found in national curriculums and government initiatives (Barrat-Pugh & Maloney, 2015). In Finland, this is not the case, but there are a few family literacy programs. The best-known family literacy program in Finland is implemented by the Finnish Reading Centre in collaboration with baby counselling centres. In this program, families with newborns are given a book bag with children's books and a family reading guide for parents. In Finland, other well-known family literacy programs include reading diplomas and 15-minute-a-day reading challenges for families (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2021). Family literacy programs are not required to be implemented only by teachers. In many countries (e.g., Sweden and Finland), libraries initiate family literacy programs. These programs are aimed at parents as well as children, and schools as well as ECE implement these programs individually or in cooperation (Rizk, 2020). The common thread is the aim of making reading a permanent practice, with all its evident social and emotional benefits.

Family literacy programs vary in terms of their implementation methods. Some programs have rather precise guidelines, while others are loosely defined (van Steensel et al., 2011). Similarly, certain programs are implemented both at school and at home and certain programs only at home (Swain & Cara, 2017). In addition, some programs provide families with relevant reading literature, some with instructions or other material, and some with both (Neyer et al., 2021). There are also differences in terms of whether reading is an activity between the child and the parent or whether the activity is directed only at the parents (van Steensel et al., 2011). A tightly regulated activity in a family literacy program means that parents are given precise instructions, and the activity is conducted both in a group and at home. An example of a loosely regulated program could be encouraging the use of the library without direct instructions or participation in-group activities (Aerila et al., 2019a, 2019b). According to Meyer et al. (2016),

family literacy programs require that the educator is aware of the family reading experiences at children's homes, children's and families' interests in reading, as well as the families' extent of involvement in supporting children's development. Their study also revealed that the educators and parents do not always see eye-to-eye regarding the aims of family literacy programs.

Family literacy programs are not always applied in families in the way the teacher has planned. This does not always imply that the program has failed. It appears that even while teachers may use, for example, lending libraries to support informal reading experiences at home (e.g., with a focus on families reading together and enjoying the story), parents might consider shared book reading as an opportunity to teach, support, and increase their children's emerging reading skills (Meyer et al., 2016). According to Rizk (2020), women—mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and nannies—are much more involved in family literacy practices, such as literacy moments and story time sessions, as compared to fathers. Rizk (2020) investigated the story time sessions and found that mothers do not necessarily require a family literacy program for story time sessions. They have inner motivation to be actively involved (Rizk, 2020). Female family adults are mostly responsible for the caring activities in small-child families, and therefore, it is natural that early reading is seen to belong to their duties.

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT

The context of the study is the piloting phase of a family literacy program called Bedtime Story Shelf. Bedtime Story Shelf is a program in which books are offered to families from school or ECE. This kind of program is often called a lending library or a cloakroom library (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2019, 2020; Aerila et al., 2021), and it is based on easy access to literature and the child's active role as a literary selector. Currently, the Bedtime Story Shelf and its applications are found in several hundred Finnish groups (Aerila et al., 2021; Aerila & Kauppinen, 2020). The books in Bedtime Story Shelves are sourced from local public libraries, from the funds of the school or ECE, or by donations. The book collection of lending libraries contains books on certain themes or a versatile selection of books that children tend to like.

The data were collected over the years 2018–2021 in ECEs and primary schools which piloted the Bedtime Story Shelf program in western and southern Finland. The teachers of these groups (approximately 20 groups) loaned the Bedtime Story Shelves with 25 books from the researchers and implemented the program for about a month. The teachers were also provided with information pertaining to the project, information on the research, and an information sheet for the parents about the research. This sheet also included a link to the questionnaire for the data collection. Participating in the program was voluntary for the families, but the teachers encouraged the families to borrow the books to homes.

The aim of this research was to investigate the parents' experiences of a family literacy program. The study addresses the following research questions:

H1: How did the parents assess the family's use of the Bedtime Story Shelf program and the influence of the program on their family literacy practices? What is the connection between these assessments and the literacy practices of the families?

H2: According to the parents' experience, what kind of factors seem to influence the use of the program?

3.1. Data and Data Analysis

The data were collected via an online questionnaire, and the data collection was anonymous as well as voluntary. The teachers participating in the piloting sent the link for the questionnaire with the information sheet and consent form to parents one month after the piloting via e-mail. If required, the questionnaire was printed and given in paper form to the parents. To ensure anonymity, the place where the family resides (city or a group) was kept anonymous. The only information regarding the participating family was the age and number of children in the family and the role of the person in the family answering the questionnaire. Parents (N = 122) who filled in the survey were mostly women (n = 109). In the participating families, there was a total of 263 children. Most of the families (59.0%) had two children, and the youngest child in the family was most often three years old.

The parents were asked on a 5-point Likert scale how often they read at home with their child (1 = not at all, 5 = multiple times a day), which describes their family literacy practices. There were also five questions about parents' reading habits in their own childhood. The parents answered (yes/no) if they agreed with the following statements: *I have read since I was a child. Adults in my childhood family used to read. I had books at home when I was a child. I have always liked to read. I was encouraged to read when I was a child.* From these five answers, a sum variable was formed (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.759$) to describe the parents' childhood reading habits. The parents were also asked how often they loaned books from the Bedtime Story Shelf (1 = often, 4 = never). The characteristics of the families are given in Table I.

TABLE I: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPATING FAMILIES

Variable	Scale	N	M	SD	Lower CI 95%	Upper CI 95%
Number of children in the family	1–7	121	2.16	0.94	1.99	2.32
Age of the youngest child	0–7	121	3.83	1.86	3.50	4.16
Family literacy practices	1–5	115	3.63	0.75	3.50	3.77
Parents' childhood reading habits	0–1	86	0.79	0.30	0.72	0.85
Bedtime Story Shelf activity	1–4	106	2.69	0.98	2.50	2.88

To get to know the parents' experiences with the Bedtime Story Shelf program, four questions were asked whether the parents thought that the program has an effect (yes/no):

1. The Bedtime Story Shelf has increased the time spent reading in the family.

2. The Bedtime Story Shelf has introduced us to new children's books.
3. The Bedtime Story Shelf has motivated our child to read.
4. The Bedtime Story Shelf has made me read more.

According to the question about using the Bedtime Story Shelf, families were divided into two groups for quantitative analyses: (1) Active use of Bedtime Story Shelf (n = 64), who had loaned books often or occasionally and (2) Inactive use of Bedtime Story Shelf (n = 41), who had loaned books only once or twice. The groups were compared in terms of the characteristics of family literacy practises and the childhood reading habits of a parent. Actively and inactively participated family groups were also compared in terms of their assessments of how the Bedtime Story Shelf activity changed their family literacy practices. The differences between the groups were assessed using the independent samples t-test and the Mann–Whitney U-test, and the limit for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. The analyses were conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics program (v27).

The qualitative analysis focused on open-ended questions and was implemented through data-driven content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019). The aim of the analysis was to investigate the experiences of families with the Bedtime Story Shelf activity and the factors which seem to influence the use of the program. The open-ended questions were first categorized via data-driven analysis into positive and negative experiences of the Bedtime Story Shelf activity. In the second phase, the two categories were analyzed via theory-driven analyses to identify themes relevant to the Bedtime Story Shelf activity as a family literacy practice. In the third phase, the open-ended questions were analyzed from the perspective of active and inactive use (see above) of the Bedtime Story Shelf activity. The analysis is supported by direct quotes from the answers. The answers are coded as 'P' to represent parents and the number of the answer (e.g., P54).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Influence of the Bedtime Story Shelf Program on Family Literacy Practices

The active and inactive families did not differ in terms of their family literacy practises, parent's childhood reading habits, the number of children in the family, or the age of the youngest child (Table II).

The families that had actively used the Bedtime Story Shelf program indicated that the program affected their literacy practices (Table III). Compared to inactively participating families, the active families' time spent on reading had increased more (small effect), and they were more often introduced to new children's books (medium effect).

4.2. Parents' Experiences on the Factors Influencing the Use of the Bedtime Story Shelf Program

The experiences of the parents with the Bedtime Story Shelf program were also investigated through open-ended questions in which the parents were asked to illustrate their experiences with the program. There were 25 positive and 18 negative responses. Those parents who used the Bedtime Story Shelf had more positive comments (n = 22) than those who were inactive (n = 3). The results were the opposite with the negative responses: active users had 8 negative responses, and inactive users had 10 negative responses. In addition, families that actively used the Bedtime Story Shelf program had suggestions for developing the activity further.

It is apparent that this family literacy program relied on the child's motivation. There were 16 responses which highlighted that implementing the Bedtime Story Shelf program depended on the child's interest and activity level. This implied that the child's motivation was a part of over half of the positive responses. According to the negative responses, the child was not interested in reading in general, or the books on the shelf did not interest the child. *“At the moment, our child is not interested in books. Helsh*

TABLE II: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FAMILIES THAT WERE ACTIVE AND INACTIVE IN USING THE BEDTIME STORY SHELF

	Bedtime story shelf program						Mann–Whitney U test	
	Active			Inactive			U	p
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD		
Number of children in the family								
Age of the youngest child	64	2.20	1.06	42	2.17	0.76	1293.0	0.708
Family literacy practices	63	3.66	1.87	42	3.81	1.74	1243.0	0.596
Parents' childhood reading habits	58	3.76	0.68	41	3.59	0.74	1060.0	0.283
Number of children in the family	49	0.77	0.30	32	0.82	0.33	702.0	0.372

TABLE III: BEDTIME STORY SHELF PROGRAM'S EFFECTS ACCORDING TO FAMILIES

The Bedtime Story Shelf has . . .	Bedtime story shelf program						Mann–Whitney U test		
	Active			Inactive			U	p	r
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD			
Increased the time spent on reading	64	2.20	1.06	42	2.17	0.76	1293.0	0.708	0.209
Introduced new children's books	63	3.66	1.87	42	3.81	1.74	1243.0	0.596	0.522
Motivated a child to read	58	3.76	0.68	41	3.59	0.74	1060.0	0.283	0.159
Made a parent read more	49	0.77	0.30	32	0.82	0.33	702.0	0.372	0.057

has some favourite books, and *helshe* only wants to listen to those" (P59). The positive remarks concentrated on the program and the child as an active agent: the child was eager to choose and loan a book, the child waited for the evening literacy time, and the child wanted to share literacy experiences with other children in the group. "Our children wanted to choose a book by themselves to take home, and the books were read several times at home" (P29).

The positive responses connected with respect to two themes: (1) the literacy practises as an evening routine, (2) parents' own readership, and the literacy practises of the family (willingness to change; dynamic). In many cases, the family literacy practises and evening routines were related to the child's motivation and active participation: since the books were borrowed by the child, he/she was also motivated to listen to the story and discuss the story with parents. "Our child wanted to borrow a new book from the shelf every evening. *Helshe* is taking care that the book is being read, *helshe* listens to the book carefully and is very interested in the book" (P4). A few parents felt that the possibility of borrowing the book from the daycare of the school gave them more time to read in the evening: "This enables literacy in the families. You do not need to go to the library since you can choose a book while taking the child home. Our literacy routines also changed in a positive way and made us read new kinds of books. I usually choose similar books" (P2). The qualitative analysis confirmed the results of the quantitative analysis, and the positive responses emphasize the possibility of developing the literacy practises of the family: reading more, getting to know new books, and involving all family members. "We chose books to read that we would not have read otherwise" (P36).

The negative responses concentrated on four themes: (1) the book collection and the program itself, (2) lack of time and other practical problems, (3) children's interest in literacy and books, and (4) the literacy practises of the family. Most commonly, parents were dissatisfied with the short time reserved for reading a book. They felt that it would have been nice to read an interesting book several times instead of bringing it back to school or daycare after one evening. Furthermore, they illustrated that, occasionally, families were too busy indulging in numerous hobbies and other responsibilities and that made it difficult to read books every evening. "The loaning time is too short. The daycare ends at four o'clock in the evening, and the children go to bed at six o'clock; one cannot be sure that we have time to read the book" (P1). A few parents believed that the book collection in the Bedtime Story Shelf program was not interesting or that the books in the collection did not change frequently enough. In addition, a few parents had specific prerequisites for the books: they must be high-quality books or have certain themes, like social-emotional (SEL) growth. "The books in the Bedtime Story Shelf were not at any point of the activity such that would interest our family" (P54).

Further, the parents made a few suggestions for improving the Bedtime Story Shelf program. They indicated changes to the book collections—the books should change more often, have certain themes, and be more versatile. "The book collection should have been wider and changed

more often" (P11). The parents also suggested that there should be some study material related to the books: "It would be nice to have some assignments connected to literacy. One idea might be dramatizing the story with all the family members. There might also be a campaign to encourage all the children to read" (P25). They also hoped that there would be more possibilities for children to share their literacy experiences during the school or daycare day or have a means to share and collect the literacy experiences of an individual family in a diary. In addition, a few parents wished that the activity would be obligatory: "Maybe all the families would participate if the books would be just given to the families: It is your turn now to read this" (P25).

5. DISCUSSION

This study illustrates the experiences of parents on a family literacy program called Bedtime Story Shelf, which was piloted in their child's ECE center or school for a month. The results of this study are mostly in accord with previous studies (e.g., Levy & Hall, 2021; Meyer et al., 2016) on family literacy programs and loaning libraries. However, this study is one of the first Finnish studies on family literacy programs and the first on loaning libraries in Finland.

The results of the study revealed that most of the families that familiarized themselves with the Bedtime Story Shelves borrowed books occasionally or only tested the program by loaning books from the shelf once or twice. However, all kinds of families with versatile family literacy practices and reading habits implemented the practice actively. This indicates that also families with less reading practices and habits could be active users of family literacy programs. The open-ended responses of the parents revealed that the factors preventing or hampering the use of the family literacy program were mostly practical (not enough information about the program to homes, a lack of time or not interesting books) and relatively easily solved by the personnel or in cooperation with the parents. Further, it seemed that the piloting period of one month was too short for some families to engage in the program.

The parents who participated actively to the Bedtime Story Shelf program assessed that the one-month piloting of the program had an influence on the literacy practices of the family: time spent on reading increased, and the families were introduced to new children's books. Since this result was the same regardless of the family's previous reading habits and practices, it can be thought that loaning library programs could be beneficial for diverse families. Therefore, it would be important to find ways to encourage all families to participate in the program. One of the parents (P25) even suggested that the program must be made obligatory.

The study highlights that there should be flexibility in implementing the program according to the needs of families: families should be able to include their own books in the book collection of the lending library, the loaning times should vary, and children should be included in activities with books and literacy materials other than those from the loaning library. It is important to note that the implementation of a family literacy program needs

input and proactivity from the teacher: the program will not be effective if the only effort from the teacher is to have the lending library available for families. Mere reading material isn't enough.

One of the main results of the study was the central role of the child. According to the parents, they participated in the program as the child was motivated by the program and was actively taking care of loaning the books from the library and organizing the reading moments at home. Additionally, one of the reasons for not participating in the program was the child's disinterest in the program and reading in general. However, getting engaged in the program cannot be the child's responsibility, but both the personnel and parents should consciously support the child's motivation and agency as a selector of reading materials, as an organizer of reading moments at home and as a participant in conversations sharing reading experiences in the ECE centers or at school. Further, the family literacy program should have a solid connection with the activities of the ECE center and the school so that the motivation of all children to participate in the program is also supported by the activities in the group.

Finally, the results of the study indicate that parents might be able to motivate each other to participate and develop the family literacy program further. It seems that the parents could help both each other and the personnel to select the books for the shelves and solve the practical issues of the implementation. It might also be a good idea to create possibilities for the parents to share the positive aspects of the program, like saving time and having a literacy moment as soon as they come home from the ECE center or school.

In summary, our results lead us to argue that a family literacy program is a social and active project between personnel, the parents and the children. It will only work if all the parties (personnel, the child and the parents) are active as well as find the activity and their own role. In other words, family literacy programs should be developed in a dialogical process and aim to support the sense of belonging to a community of readers (community of readers see Cremin et al., 2014; sense of belonging see McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Further, the study highlights that in Finland, there is a need for loaning libraries, and the programs should better consider the diversity of families.

6. CONCLUSION

Family literacy programs are often pondered from the perspective of the child. This study shows how important it is to get the whole family actively involved in literacy programs, while parents see the benefits of the programs irrespective of the previous literacy practices and the reading habits of the families. The most important thing is to activate the children and engage them in the activity. This is where parents and teachers play a key role. Not all children are automatically motivated and need support from others. In that way, the implementation of the program becomes a dialogical process and relies on the sense of belonging to a community (about the sense of belonging, see McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Creating a sense of belonging in all families is not only about getting the families to read

more books but also about enhancing the general social and emotional well-being of families and supporting the learning outcomes of children (see the benefits of family literacy programs Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018).

The piloting project of a family literacy program illustrated in the study was not successful in all parts, as not all the families in the ECE centers and classes participated in the piloting involved. However, there were participants from families with various kinds of literacy habits equipped with critical voices regarding the program.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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