

# Improving Literacy Development in Foster Children: Best Practices for the K-6 Classroom

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*Abstract: Foster children who have experienced abuse or neglect are far more likely to fail a grade than children who have not experienced this trauma (Statman-Weil 2015). This research study explored current teachers' best practices for improving literacy development in foster children in the K-6 classroom. Themes emerged indicating the teachers' perceptions of meeting the needs of foster children, especially as related to improving literacy skills and encouraging literacy development. These best practices can be implemented by K-6 teachers to assist in preventing school failure for foster children.*

*Keywords: Foster children; Literacy skills; Storybook reading; Parental involvement; Social interaction*

## Introduction

The current study explored best practices for improving literacy development in foster children in the K-6 classroom. Current K-6 classroom teachers provided their perceptions of best practices used in their own classrooms for improving literacy development in foster children. The provided best practices have been implemented by the teacher participants to meet the needs of foster children in their classrooms. The primary themes that emerged from the research indicate the importance of social interaction, storybook reading, and parental involvement in ensuring adequate literacy development for the foster child.

## Theoretical Framework

Foster children tend to struggle socially and academically, particularly in the area of literacy development, due to the experienced trauma and instability of the home environment during early childhood. "Children who experience trauma are two-and-a-half times more likely to fail a grade in school than their nontraumatized peers." (Statman-Weil 2015, 73). Classroom teachers "can and must participate directly in creating positive social change for our children." (Washington 2015, 39). According to Vygotsky, mastery of language is necessary and foundational for all future academic achievement. (Tracey and Morrow, 2012). As such, adequate literacy development is crucial to overall academic success. Specific strategies can be implemented in the classroom to support the social and academic skills of the foster child leading to an increase in the literacy development of the foster child.

## *Social Interaction*

An individual's development is directly affected by the individual's environment. (Tissington 2008). Children's social interactions with others, particularly parents or caregivers, is the basis for learning, particularly literacy development. (Tracey and Morrow 2012). According to Vygotsky, "children learn as a result of their social interactions with others." (Tracey and Morrow 2012, 127). As such, the social interactions during the early childhood stage of

development is crucial to adequate literacy development and overall academic achievement. Interaction between child and caregiver, particularly during storybook reading, has been linked to the development of literacy skills. (Walsh and Blewitt 2006).

### ***Storybook Reading***

Storybook reading has been proven to be a best practice in developing early literacy skills. (Neuman and Roskos 1993). Storybook reading encourages literacy development while allowing the student an opportunity to engage in positive experiences. (Gillet, Temple, and Crawford 2004). “Reading aloud invites children into the world of books, takes them on journeys to faraway lands, and motivates them to learn and explore.” (Dollins 2014, 9). This positive experience can have a significant impact on foster children, encouraging literacy skill development as well as the development of appropriate social and emotional skills.

In addition to encouraging the development of literacy skills, storybook reading promotes a positive attitude toward reading. (Kotaman 2007; LaCour, McDonald, Tissington, and Thomason 2013). The development of a positive attitude toward reading is a key component for future development of literacy skills. “From storybook reading, a child obtains a familiarity with reading text, a positive attitude toward literacy, and develops a knowledge base for future literacy learning.” (LaCour, McDonald, Tissington, and Thomason 2013, 2).

### ***Parental Involvement***

The home environment is an essential component of literacy development as the interactions between caregiver and child establish the basis for future achievement. (Gillet, Temple, and Crawford 2004; National Institute for Literacy 2003; Sulzby 1985; Vygotsky 1978). As such, an important role of educators is to support and encourage families. (Reyes, Baker, Acevedo, McPheeters, Gomez, Gray, and Habib 2015). Teachers can share specific tips and ideas with foster parents to assist them in encouraging literacy development in the foster child. Reading aloud to the child is one of the most important tips to provide to the caregiver. “Reading aloud to young children prepares them for later proficiency in independent reading and writing.” (Dollins 2014, 9). Questioning and discussion while reading a book has a significant positive impact on literacy development skills. (Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, and Daley 1998). Providing storybooks to families has a positive impact on the home literacy environment with the impact increasing over time. This positive impact includes an increase in literacy skills as well as the child’s attitude toward reading. (LaCour, McDonald, Tissington, and Thomason 2013).

## **Method**

The purpose of this study is to identify strategies in-service elementary and middle school teachers (grades K-6) use in a regular, public school classroom setting to encourage and support literacy development in foster children.

### ***Participants***

The participants of the study are a convenience sampling of current K-6 teachers. The participating teachers were purposefully chosen for this study due to the percentage of foster children attending the schools in which they teach. The participants are teachers from three elementary schools and one middle school in a public school district in central Arkansas. The participating schools reside in an area which includes three foster care agencies. One of the agencies is a group foster home. A total of thirty-six current K-6 teachers participated in the study, with participation varying per question response.

**Data Collection**

A survey instrument developed by the researchers was used to collect data. The survey consisted of open-response items which were based upon the findings of previous research studies. The open-response survey allowed participants the opportunity to share any best practices and lessons learned in developing literacy skills in foster children. The open-response items were an attempt to determine the perceptions, interventions, and strategies conducted by the participants as compared with previous research findings.

**Procedures**

The survey instrument was distributed to all participants in an email survey form. Participants were notified that participation was strictly voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Participants were allowed to respond to the survey items using descriptions of their own perceptions.

**Data Analysis**

The survey was analyzed using the constant comparative method. The survey responses were coded to determine any categories of similar responses while comparing units of meaning across categories. Categories were refined and analyzed for any emerging themes. Relationships and patterns occurring across categories were explored. Finally, overall themes of responses were determined, yielding an understanding of the participants’ perceived best practices for literacy instruction to meet the needs of the foster child. (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen 2006).

**Results**

From the constant comparative data analysis method, themes emerged indicating the best practices implemented in the K-6 teacher participant's classrooms to meet the needs of foster children.

**Social Interaction**

Participants were asked to provide their reaction to the following statement: “In order to effectively develop literacy skills, children must play an active role in the learning process through socially interacting with adults or more mature peers.” Teachers who participated in the survey agreed that interaction is important for children to effectively develop literacy skills. Table 1.1 shows the themes presented for social interaction with adults and peers.

Table 1.1: Social Interaction with Adults and Peers

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Peers</i>	<i>Interaction</i>
<i>Subthemes</i>	Social	Valuable

Note: N=25

**Peers**

A primary theme that emerged from the research was the importance of foster children interacting with their peers. One participant stated, “I feel that this is somewhat true, except children must also interact with their peers to be accepted and validated. Children often learn more from each other and social interactions than they do with teaching and adult interactions.” One participant discussed the advantages and disadvantages of social interaction with more mature peers by stating, “I agree that to develop literacy skills children must interact socially with adults and more mature peers. They are much more likely to be exposed to a variety of

vocabulary and learning opportunities. However, in the same respect, there are times when the vocabulary and learning experiences are not positive.”

**Interaction**

The teachers, overwhelmingly, indicated the importance of foster children interacting with others to develop literacy skills. One teacher stated, “I think it is important to have those interactions with adults/mature peers when developing literacy skills. For some students this interaction is going to solely be from the teacher.” Another participant indicated that “children need to interact with adults, mature peers, and their own peers. We learn so much from our environment, our experiences, and from the people in our lives.” An additional participant shared the importance of social interaction by stating, “Social interaction is important in building life skills. The learning process is not just encountered at school, it is also a daily endeavor where non-educational conversations and interactions create schema for later educational experiences and connections.”

**Storybook Reading**

Participants were asked to respond to the following statement regarding the use of storybooks in the classroom: “Discuss the specific strategies you use while reading storybooks aloud in your classroom to connect with students and/or encourage literacy development in students.” The two emergent themes reported by the teachers to complete the survey was the use of class discussion and relating stories to personal experiences as the most often used read aloud strategies to encourage literacy. Making predictions, active participation, and to vary the use of language emerged as the second most often used strategies with storybooks to encourage literacy. One way the teachers responded to the survey indicated the importance of having students actively participate by relating the stories in a personal way. The third category of emergent themes related to read aloud strategies was to make connections, allow for peer interactions, develop storybook characters, and for students to order books for home use. Family literacy advocates insist that reading storybooks at home is the single best predictor for student learning gains. (Walker 2015). However, teachers did not report this strategy among the most often utilized. Table 1.2 shows the themes presented for read aloud strategies to encourage literacy.

Table 1.2: Read Aloud Strategies to Encourage Literacy

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Personal Experiences</i>		
<i>Subthemes 1</i>	Predictions	Participation	Language	
<i>Subthemes 2</i>	Connections	Peer Interaction	Characters	Book Orders

*Note: N=36*

**Discussions**

Participants expressed the importance of using discussion as a method of improving literacy development during storybook read alouds. One teacher stated, “We often make connections with the text we are reading.” Another teacher expressed that, “This often opens up discussions on many topics and issues.” An additional teacher indicated that, “Some we discuss as a class, but often it opens a door for a student to come talk to me privately.”

## Personal Experiences

A theme which emerged as a best practice for improving literacy skills during storybook read alouds is the use of books to connect to personal experiences. One teacher shared that, “Talking about my personal love for certain books and how they can let you take a ‘mental vacation’ from present reality was the best strategy to employ in the classroom.”

### *Dialogue during Storybook Reading*

Participants were also asked to provide their reaction to the following statement: “Storybook reading, which includes dialogue between adult and child, is crucial for adequate literacy development in children.” Participating teachers agree that dialogue is crucial for literacy development in children. Table 1.3 shows the themes presented for literacy development through dialogue.

Table 1.3: Literacy Development through Dialogue

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Modeling</i>	<i>Literacy Skills</i>	<i>Attitude</i>
<i>Subthemes 1</i>	Connection	Communicates	Love for Books
<i>Subthemes 2</i>			Bond with Others

Note: N=25

## Modeling

One theme that emerged from the research indicated that dialogue was an opportunity for teachers or caregivers to model effective use of literacy skills while connecting with the child. One participant stated, “Storybook reading including dialogue is crucial because it provides modeling and framework for children to connect with their caregivers in real life.”

## Literacy Skills

Another theme that emerged expressed the importance of building literacy skills through communication or dialogue while reading storybooks. One teacher indicated, “I agree that storybook reading between adult and child facilitates adequate literacy development in children. They are able to use that exposure to communicate effectively with others.”

## Attitude

In addition to dialogue impacting literacy skills, a theme emerged which expressed the importance of dialogue during storybook reading in cultivating a positive attitude toward reading for the foster child. One participant exclaimed, “I completely agree with this!! Those who read from very early on with their parents or an adult or someone in their lives, will more than likely create a love for books, a love for learning, will comprehend better and have better fluency, and will create an even closer bond with the family member or friend.” Another participant stated, “Storybook reading helps develop literacy development because it helps students learn the beginning of literacy. When students share the bond of reading with a parent, it gives the child a wonderful love of reading precious memories with their parents.”

**Parental Involvement**

Participants were asked to respond to the following question: “What role do parents or caregivers play in the literacy development of children?” When asked what role parents or caregivers play in the development of literacy skills in the children, the most outstanding answer was, “Huge!” Teachers believe that caregivers in the home are role models for children in many ways and certainly in the literacy development in children. Table 1.4 shows the themes presented for roles of parents or caregivers.

Table 1.4: Roles of Parents or Caregivers

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Huge Impact</i>	<i>Role Models</i>	<i>Emergent Literacy</i>
<i>Subthemes 1</i>	Books	Encourage	Engagement
<i>Subthemes 2</i>	Interactive	Vocabulary	Language
<i>Subthemes 3</i>	Quality Time	Questioning	

*Note: N=34*

**Huge Impact**

The prevalent theme that emerged in the research was that caregivers play a huge role in the literacy development of the foster child. One teacher stated, “They play a HUGE role. I believe that parents who read to and encourage their children to read and read a broad variety of texts, really set a good tone for the students' education and will help them, greatly with their comprehension, fluency and writing.” Another teacher exclaimed, “Parents play a huge role. Those students who do well have often had parents, who read to them at a young age, are interested in their schoolwork, and who take an active role in education.”

**Role Models**

Another primary theme that emerged from the research was the impact caregivers have on children as they serve as the primary role model for the child in developing literacy skills. One participant expressed, “I think all parents or caregivers should play a role in literacy development. Students need to see parents read and put a high value on reading. They should encourage students to read, and they should help the child find books they are interested in. Reading does not have to be fiction. Many students like to learn about specific subjects like bears, magic, planets, get these types of books into the students' hands.”

**Emergent Literacy**

The additional theme that emerged indicated the import role parents play in building emergent literacy skills in the child which is crucial for future academic success. One teacher explained, “Parents/ caregivers have the ability to introduce literacy to students before school age. If they take advantage of this opportunity, student may already have some foundational reading skills, as simple as holding the book upright and flipping left to right. They can also use this early development time to model voice inflection and reading fluently.” Another teacher illuminated the impact on foster children with the following statements, “Children learn first from their parents or caregivers. When children are removed from their homes, they miss out on key language learning opportunities. Teachers must share specific tips with foster parents to assist them in encouraging literacy development in the foster child.”

### *Resources in the Home*

Participants were asked to respond to the following question: “What specific resources have you found useful in encouraging reading in the home between foster parent and child?” Providing books for reading in the home was the overwhelming emergent theme. This could be due to the stem question which asks “what specific resources” are appropriate for encouraging reading at home. One teacher participant stated, “I do not require outside reading.” However, overall, teachers do believe that reading in the home is important. Table 1.5 shows the themes presented for resources that the teachers see as useful for encouraging reading at home.

Table 1.5: Resources Useful to Encouraging Reading at Home

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Books at Home</i>	<i>Modeling</i>		
<i>Subthemes</i>	Praise	Interactive	Reading Logs	Rewards

*Note: N=24*

### **Books at Home**

The primary theme that emerged indicated the importance of providing books to families to use at home. One teacher shared, “I send home books that interest the children, and offer rewards/positive reinforcements for the students for reading to their parent & bringing back the signed sheet. The students love this. Providing storybooks to families has a positive impact on the home literacy environment with the impact of it increasing overtime. I also try and send home weekly reading connections/ideas and activities to invoke the student and parent in reading/literacy ideas. Having parents come and read aloud to my class is a great way to encourage reading and form that bond. I also offer resources that are available to both the parent and the child inside and outside of the school. Having them read and write together, act out stories, and draw pictures about the stories is also a great way to interact.”

### **Modeling**

A second theme that emerged was, once again, the impact the caregiver has on the child by modeling literacy skills in the home. One teacher responded by saying, “Huge! Parents model reading behaviors constantly.” Another teacher exclaimed, “Attitudes play a large role in the acquisition of literacy skills.” An additional teacher agrees that, “They [parents] are the first models of literacy that children see.” One teacher expressed that, “They should be actively reading to and with children on a consistent basis.”

### **Discussion**

The primary themes that emerged from the research as provided by the comments of the K-6 teachers illuminate the teachers’ perceptions and beliefs regarding foster children as related to literacy development. Best practices emerged which have proven effective in meeting the needs of the foster child in the K-6 classroom.

The research results indicate that K-6 teachers use classroom discussions during storybook reading and connect the storybooks to the student’s personal experiences to build literacy skills in foster children. In addition, teachers believe that social interaction, particularly with peers, is an important aspect of literacy development. In particular, dialogue during read alouds offers a chance for adults to model literacy skills to foster children while encouraging student

development of literacy skills and a positive attitude toward reading. Further, dialogue while reading encourages a positive bond between the adult and child.

A primary theme regarding caregivers indicates that K-6 teachers believe that caregivers have a huge impact on students, particularly related to literacy development, as they serve as the primary role model for the student. Teachers indicated that the most useful resources that encourage reading in the home were providing families with books to use in the home. These results provide teacher perceived best practices for building literacy skills in foster children in the K-6 classroom.

## Conclusions

The research indicates possible best practices for the K-6 classroom to encourage literacy development among foster children. Many of the themes which emerged in the current research study support the literature related to best practices for developing literacy skills in K-6 children. Research specific to developing literacy skills in foster children, however, is limited. This research study furthers the literature by providing current best practices implemented by K-6 teachers on a regular basis to specifically meet the needs of foster children, ensuring adequate literacy development among the students in their classrooms and schools in order to prevent school failure. "Vygotsky argued that children's learning is most affected by their mastery of language." (Tracey and Morrow 2012, 128). Therefore, establishing best practices for the K-6 classroom regarding literacy development for foster children is imperative to providing these students with the opportunity to be academically successful. Due to the relatively small sample size of the participants in the current study, additional research is needed regarding best practices in building literacy skills in K-6 foster children to further the implications provided in this study.

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