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The Enduring Etiology of Family Literacy: Tracing Roots Across Twelve Disciplinary Strands

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Abstract

Family literacy is frequently framed as a modern policy invention, a programmatic response to perceived deficits in the home. This paper argues instead that family literacy is an enduring civilisational practice whose causes, conditions, and consequences have been contested across centuries and traditions of thought. Adopting an etiological approach, understood as the systematic study of the origins and causes of a phenomenon, the paper traces the roots of family literacy across twelve interwoven strands: philosophy, religion, anthropology, gender studies, technology, artificial intelligence, cultural memory, education, myth, ethics, personhood, and human normativity. From Plato's oikos and the Deuteronomic mandate to teach one's children, through the ethnographies of Heath and of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, to the algorithmic mediation of household reading by large language models, each strand reveals the family not as a deficient recipient of schooled literacy but as an active producer of literate subjectivities, a mnemonic archive, and an epistemic agent. The paper advances a convergence claim: family literacy persists precisely because it sits at the intersection of all twelve strands simultaneously, and interventions targeting any single strand leave root causes intact. Implications for research, policy, and practice follow: adopting participatory and ethnographic methods, resourcing multilingual and oral traditions, and aligning emerging artificial intelligence governance with the literate rights of households. Understanding causes, it is argued, dismantles deficit narratives and repositions families as the resilient centre of literate culture.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Cultural Memory; Deficit Discourse; Intergenerational Transmission; Kinship