



Approaches to family literacy: Exploring the possibilities

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In the years since Taylor (1983) first used the term *family literacy*, it has been appropriated in many different ways. To some, family literacy is an explanatory concept—a way to describe how parents and children read and write together and alone during everyday activities. To others, family literacy is a program or a curriculum—a construct for teaching parents how to prepare their children for success in school. In the context of most preschool and elementary school settings, both of these meanings are important. Especially in classrooms that are linguistically and culturally diverse, effective classroom teachers seek to understand and build on the particular ways parents and children use literacy together as they go about their daily routines. In addition, effective classroom teachers help parents to learn about and engage their children in literacy practices that are closely related to success in school.

As editor for the Family Literacy Department, I will introduce readers to three different family literacy programs in the United States. Each one is dedicated to accomplishing family literacy in both senses of the term, and each is doing so in decidedly different ways. This first column features the Intergenerational Literacy Project (ILP) in Chelsea, Massachusetts. In this program parents attend classes both to develop and extend their own English literacy and to support their children's literacy development. My second column (September, 2006) will explore Project EASE (Jordon, Snow, & Porche, 2000), which focuses primarily on teaching parents to implement activities at home that will improve their children's literacy but does not have as its goal the improvement of adult literacy.

My third column (March, 2007) will highlight a project that represents the U.S. Even Start model; such projects offer direct service to both children and parents. I hope that these columns, individually and collectively, will help teachers to develop a portfolio of practices that will lead to parent-teacher interactions that are respectful, honorable, and instructive.

Intergenerational Literacy Project

The ILP started in 1989 in Chelsea, Massachusetts. It is based on the idea that a thoughtfully designed family literacy program can serve two purposes: to teach “the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life” (Delpit, 1995, p. 45) and to uncover and build on the household funds of knowledge present in all families (Moll & Greenberg, 1991). The ILP has served nearly 2,000 families, mostly new immigrants to the United States (from 56 different countries). The ILP's purpose is twofold: to help parents develop their own literacy and to support the practice of family literacy in the home.

A typical day in the ILP

On a typical weekday morning, the ILP begins at 8:20 a.m., about 10 minutes before classes start. Parents bring their children into the children's classroom, hang jackets in their cubbies, and label diaper bags and formula bottles with children's names. The children's program teacher and five tutors greet the children and help them settle into

appropriate activities. Infants and toddlers go to a special corner with two parent tutors who were formerly learners themselves; preschoolers move to one of three tables to begin writing or craft activities, or they sit on the floor to browse through a book. After a few minutes, the teacher calls the preschoolers to “circle time” on the rug where they sing songs, engage in finger plays, and read—with great involvement and animation—the book of the week. On this day, the book is Ed Emberley’s *Go Away, Big Green Monster!* (1993, Little, Brown), which is part of the “All About Me” thematic unit that begins the academic year.

In one of three morning adult classes, 22 parents (most of them women) have just completed literacy logs, in which they report reading and writing that they’ve done the day before on their own and with their children. To prepare for the reading of the day, the parents focus on the front of the room where their two teachers are introducing the day’s selection. The reading is a short magazine article on how to help children deal with fear. The teachers remind the parents that their preschool-age children are reading a book on overcoming their fears about monsters—the book that the parents had read the day before.

On the chalkboard, one teacher writes the title of the day’s article and asks parents what they think it might be about and what they, as parents, know about helping their children overcome fears. Some parents respond in their first language (with another person translating their responses), while others choose to respond in English. Teachers build a semantic map on the chalkboard detailing responses; then they introduce a few key vocabulary words, using them in a variety of contexts until it is clear that all the parents understand. They then turn to the reading for the day, which is projected onto a whiteboard by an overhead projector. A tutor reads the article aloud and while doing so points to each line. After the initial reading, both teachers return to the semantic map on the chalkboard and draw parents’ attention to the ideas they had shared before reading and ask what they read in the article that could be added to their map on the chalkboard.

After this brief discussion, the teachers assign learners to pairs and small groups, depending on their English proficiency level, to reread the article in order to deepen comprehension and support flu-

ency and accuracy. Two pairs work independently, rereading the article orally. Two groups (one of six learners and one of five learners) who speak several different first languages work in English with tutors to read the article, stopping after each paragraph to make sure they have understood what they have read. One group of five parents, who are Spanish speakers with little English, reads through the first paragraph, discussing it in both Spanish and English to make sure they understand what they are reading. The tutor struggles to keep them focused on trying to understand the main idea of the paragraph, rather than engaging in a word-by-word translation of the text. Two parents who are attending school for the first time are working with a teacher to reread *Go Away, Big Green Monster!*, the book the class read the day before. The teacher uses both gestures and speech to help the parents connect the printed words to their meanings and to convey the notion that monsters can be frightening to children.

With 10 minutes left in the 2-hour period, the teachers reconvene the class as a whole. They review the semantic map they developed before reading the article and ask learners to share their thoughts on what they have read. One teacher then gives them a brief preview of the next day’s lesson, reminds them how they and their children might engage in literacy interactions during the day and evening, and then all leave for the day.

Findings from the ILP

Over the years of the ILP, a diverse collection of assessment practices have been used to monitor and document project outcomes, including measures of attendance and retention, writing progress, parents’ personal uses of reading and writing, parents’ engagement of their children in literacy activities, and children’s success in school (e.g., Paratore, 2001; Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). The following is a summary of the findings from the various data sources.

- The ILP has consistently achieved rates of attendance and retention that exceed those of traditional adult basic education and, in many cases, of other family literacy programs, indicating that daily instructional practices are effective in maintaining parents’ motivation to

advance their own and their children's literacy knowledge.

- From beginning to end of program participation, parents increase their use of reading and writing outside of class to achieve personal goals, thereby making print literacy a more frequent routine in their daily lives.
- From beginning to end of program participation, parents increase the frequency with which they engage their children in the types of literacy events that have been found to prepare children for success in early reading, particularly, and in school, generally.
- By the end of program, parents consistently report engaging children in storybook reading at least once each week, a practice that has been found to correlate highly with early reading achievement.

Building a portfolio of teaching practices

Are there ideas or practices from this family literacy project that might be a good fit for the work you are trying to do in your community? Jot down any ideas that might be a springboard to a better or bigger idea that will help you to bring parents and teachers together in ways that honor and bridge the literacy traditions and practices that are integral to family and classroom life. As you consider how to shape your own efforts, be aware that programs intended to influence the practice of family literacy are, at their core, parent-teacher partnerships. As such, let two important principles guide you. First, developing meaningful parent-teacher partnerships requires communication channels "that are open, dependable, [and] nonintrusive" (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 94). Second, once contact has been established, the "substance of the content must be such that it prompts parents to act in ways that will help the child academically" (Goldenberg, 1989, p. 64).

Paratore is editor of the Family Literacy Department. She teaches at Boston University. Much of the section "A typical day in the ILP" first appeared in Paratore, J.R., & Krol-Sinclair, B. (2003). *Have you considered: Planning interventions that both honor and extend existing family literacy practices*. The California Reader, 36, 66-73.

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