

## **FAMILY LITERACY**

Public lecture held at the Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia, July 15, 2011

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### **Acknowledgements**

My presence here is due to a fortunate chance, which is to have met an information professional, Dr. Alan Hopkinson (Middlesex University) last year at the IFLA Conference in Gothenburg, who involved me in the Tempus Program jointly organized by Middlesex University (UK), the University of Parma (Italy) and the University of Riga (Latvia), in connection with the University of Tbilisi (Georgia) and other partner institutions in Armenia and Uzbekistan.

For me, this is an unique opportunity, as a public librarian and research-grant holder of the University of Parma, to share my views on this topic with colleagues in countries that are geographically so far away from mine. I have already discovered, after meeting these wonderful colleagues, that information professionals can be considered an international community, in some ways a family, of people that share common views and values.

I would like to thank everybody who supported my visit to Georgia at both Middlesex University and Parma University, as well as Ilia State University: Alan, Charles, Anna Maria, Tamara and Natia.

This presentation will be mostly based on some recent literature about family literacy and, in particular, on the book "*Family Literacy: from theory to practice*" edited by Andrea DeBruin-Parecki and Barbara Krol-Sinclair in 2003 (reprinted in 2004) and issued by the International Reading Association ([www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org)).

### **What is family literacy?**

The definition of "family literacy" is relatively new. The term appeared for the first time in a dissertation in 1983. Since families are so complex, and literacies can differ very much from one cultural as well as geographical

area to another, there was, since the very beginning, no unique way of interpreting “family literacy” as a concept (DeBruin-Parecki & Krol-Sinclair, 2004, p. 1). In fact, according to social scientists' views, family literacy may be associated with:

- psychology
- emergent literacy
- beginning reading
- anthropology
- sociology

Researchers have come to the conclusion that if the household is a rich, positive, and comfortable environment, children may have more chances to effectively learn and obtain success in their school careers. But teachers hold a different viewpoint, because, they observe, family literacy is “a vague concept that has not linked recent methodologically sound and applicable research-with sound practice, effective strategies, and resulting outcomes” (DeBruin-Parecki & Krol-Sinclair, 2004, p. 2).

What is evident from this observation is that, in the last decade or so, solutions to problems cannot be prepared beforehand, because literacy issues are solved in a very different way than we were used to. In fact, that observation seems to be rooted in a rigid educational protocol, that maybe has to be dismissed.

### **Is family literacy conflicting with school literacy?**

The hierarchical way of teaching and learning is no more a must. On the contrary, there is a bottom-up approach to learning. The learner has come to the forefront of education. Learning is an activity that has been recognized as a long-life occupation. Therefore, it has been noted that education begins within the family, and that theory can be connected to practice in a meaningful way (DeBruin-Parecki & Krol-Sinclair, 2004, p. 2).

Nonetheless, there has been much debate on the topic, especially related to the substantial differences between home and school literacy. What kind of literacies are naturally, and seamlessly, taught in households? Are these literacies and the way children approach them a barrier to literacies taught at school? Which is more effective?

Some researchers observed that these literacies should not collide into each other, but rather try to integrate (Paratore, 2004, p. 12). Some of the activities that could support integration are colloquia between parents and teachers, home-school journals, oral storytelling, parallel parent-teacher-

child reflections, conferences, adult literacy conversations (Paratore, 2004, p. 24).

### **How do children learn to be literate?**

As Richgels puts it, “young children are not either readers and writers or nonreaders and nonwriters. Rather, literacy is better characterized as a gradually emerging competence.” (Richgels, 2004, p. 28). Various processes can enhance this development: just think about how many times little children ask their mothers (or fathers) to read their favourite storybooks. And what happens if you change the story? They complain.

They see adults writing, and they want to scribble words. They listen to unfamiliar words, and they imitate the pronunciation, without knowing the meaning of the words. Viceversa, they can exercise in inventing spelling for those words that they have never heard of before (Richgels, 2004, p. 28). They experiment. They explore. They learn by trial and error. They learn by doing, until they develop an awareness of the issues surrounding literacy. The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children have issued a position statement in 1998, in which they jointly recognized some abilities children may acquire in the household:

- listening to storybooks and discuss their content
- understanding that print carries a message
- engaging in reading and/or writing attempts
- identifying labels, and signs
- playing rhyming games
- identifying some letters, matching sounds and letters
- trying to represent written language

(Richgels, 2004, p. 31).

### **How can family literacy be promoted?**

Richgels (2004, p. 33) names some strategies to support family literacy:

- creating opportunities for children's reading and writing
- observing what children do with reading and writing
- encouraging them to enjoy their experiments
- enriching spoken vocabulary
- providing out of context language experiences
- waiting for and listening to their contributions

- extending children's comments
- frequently reading and discussing storybooks
- reading over and over favorites
- following-up children's interests or abilities  
etc.

Another researcher, Billie J. Enz (2004), observed that “as children acquire language, they are able to share with others what they feel, think, believe, and want” (2004, p. 51). The foundation of literacy is language. Already from 12 to 36 months of age, children can be able to think about real objects looking at their representations. They can “read” pictures and short printed words before they are 3 years old. But what can parents do? (2004, p. 53-54).

### **It is easy, like A, B, C!**

A = Attention

B = Bonding

C = Communication

Children need to be constantly reminded of the same things. They prefer frequency over duration. Five minutes for them are a considerable timespan.

Reading storybooks again and again allow them to consolidate their vocabulary and knowledge of the story. Everytime they learn something new. They should have many storybooks at their disposal, and be allowed to manipulate books to catch their attention.

Reading storybooks with different voices is a funny experience. Children like drama. And also drawing stories and characters (Enz, 2004, p. 60-63).

### **Every child his/her book**

From the birth to one year (babies)...

...try recognition and labeling games

...photobook stories

...talking

...manipulation of objects

From one to two years (toddlers)...

...enjoy sounds of language

...handle books, learn conventions of print

...participate in activities

...label familiar people

...like read-aloud and sing-aloud books

From two to three years (young preschoolers)...

...are aware of writing

...recognize familiar logos, symbols

...enjoy listening to storybooks

...can retell familiar stories (and correct adults who make changes!)

From three to five years (preschoolers)...

...recognize letters, write notes

...try to read familiar storybooks

...find private time to explore books

...print is functional, important

(Enz, p. 64-67).

### **Not only young children!**

Family literacy involves parental action not only with young children, but throughout the life of children. One of the most critical periods in life is the adolescence, when young girls and boys are confronted with increasingly difficult tasks at school. These tasks are often unrelated to their real life interests, so the family should support them to overcome this odd period (Richardson & Sacks, 2004).

### **Not only mothers are involved**

Researchers have tried to investigate the role of the fathers in the family as far as their role as information literacy instructors is concerned (Gadsden, 2004, p. 121). Results posed new questions, such as:

- How can fathers evaluate their children's information literacy progress?
- Can fathers convey literacy through playing with children?
- Are differences in ethnicity, class, and relationships to children and their mothers an issue for fathers and how do they understand their role inside the family?
- How can fathers be involved not only in family, but also in school literacy?
- Does it make sense to separate the role of the fathers from that of the mothers?
- Do practitioners and researchers build on the different knowledge and background that fathers have in respect to mothers?

### **The richness of multilingual families**

Do you speak more than one language in your family? This is a unique

opportunity for children to learn naturally more than one mother tongue. Even if you are not as lucky as this, there might be literacy programs that can help your kid to learn another language. The earlier, the better.

### **A disabled citizen is still a citizen**

Samuel, a 4-year-old boy with extremely limited physical motion, uses a wheelchair to move around outside the home. He is helped by specialized personnel with tools that can aid him express himself, among which a voice-output computer system. His mother hated all this electronic stuff. She wanted to read books aloud to his child. The instructors, in her opinion, were just able to say: “Have him sit like this”, or, “Have him push this button”, and similar things. As if he couldn't understand anything. Have you never encountered a boy like Samuel? Then, you should know that even disabled children are capable of appreciating storytelling and, later on, symbolic interaction with language.

These individuals show very well that general, fixed, and technologically oriented definitions of literacy development are superficial and do not provide help to allow them to step the so-called “ladder to literacy model” generally based on “normal” people's skills. How can we ensure that the opportunity to become citizens is not denied to them? (Kliwer, 2004, p. 149-151). The responsibility lies in the “people who have the power to define the capacities of other human beings” as to allow “multiple social paths” towards literacy (Kliwer, 2004, p. 164).

### **Some examples of literacy programs**

- Even Start: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/evenstartformula/index.html> “This program offers grants to support local family literacy projects that integrate early childhood education, adult literacy (adult basic and secondary-level education and instruction for English language learners), parenting education, and interactive parent and child literacy activities for low-income families with parents who are eligible for services under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and their children from birth through age 7. Teen parents and their children from birth through age 7 also are eligible. All participating families must be those most in need of program services.”
- Head Start: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/index.html> “Head

Start is a national program that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to enrolled children and families.”

- Read to Me: <http://www.readtomeprogram.org/> “Babies need books. Parents need books. READ TO ME encourages parents to read books to their babies. The READ TO ME program is an organized series of workshops to get young parents to know and trust the pleasures contained in picture books for children.”
- Books for Babies: [http://www.famlit.ca/programs\\_and\\_projects/programs/babies.html](http://www.famlit.ca/programs_and_projects/programs/babies.html) “Books for Babies is a program that encourages parents of infants between birth and 12 months to share books with their babies. It supports all families in developing early literacy and language experiences and promotes healthy family relationships.”
- Born to Read: <http://www.borntoread.org/> “ Trained volunteers visit new parents in the birthing centers at Beaufort Memorial Hospital and Hilton Head Hospital. They bring the parents a gift bag containing two books for the baby, a bib, a shirt and other items and advise the parents of the importance of daily reading and talking with their babies starting at birth.”
- Nati per leggere [www.natiperleggere.it](http://www.natiperleggere.it) The Italian family literacy national program, started by the Italian Library Association and the National Associations of Paediatricians.

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