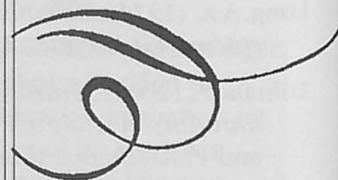


LOW LITERACY: BREAKING THE FAMILY CYCLE

by Susan Klingler



The more you read, the more you know. The more you know, the smarter you grow. The smarter you are, the longer you stay in school. The longer you stay in school, . . . the more money you earn and . . . the higher your children's grades will be . . . and the longer you will live.

In these few sentences, Jim Trelease (2006, p. xxv) distills the statistics down to two essential connections: one between strong literacy skills and quality and length of life and one between the parents' literacy level and the child's. As educators, we want our students to be literate because we understand these connections; furthermore, we recognize that literacy levels are unacceptably low, especially among non-white and low-income families ("Research on Early Literacy," 2005). Our own professional concern over this phenomenon motivates us to search for ways to improve literacy, but now, with the No Child Left Behind demands, labels, and threats nipping at our heels, the stakes are even higher, and the search becomes more desperate and, one hopes, more focused.

As Trelease (2006) asserts, reading is *the* fundamental skill, and recent research informs us that a child's literacy experiences before entering school are so important that children who lack rich language experiences from birth until age three or four are already "left behind" before they enter school. The Carnegie Foundation reports that "35% of children in the United States enter public schools with such low levels of the skills and motivations that are needed as starting points . . . that they are at substantial risk for early academic difficulties" ("Research on Early Literacy," 2005, ¶ 1). And once a child starts out behind, he or she will likely remain behind. According to the Position Statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, "Failing to give children literacy experiences until they are in school can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain" (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000, p. 5).

To close the achievement gap, schools must turn to remediation, which is only marginally successful. In my own experience as a high school English teacher, it has become painfully clear to me in my efforts at remediation that I lack the necessary skills: I am not a reading teacher, and often it is a reading teacher that my students need. I have listened as elementary school administrators explained their plans for remediation: cut afternoon recess, reduce time spent on science and social studies (at least during the weeks preceding the state tests), keep the low-achievers after school for an extra hour of learning. None of these remedies seems sound to me. I began thinking about my own at-risk students: high school juniors who will likely remain in our community and have their children young (some are already parents). These very children will be entering our schools in a few short years. I concluded that maybe the best solution I can offer for increasing literacy in my community is to teach these future parents about early and family literacy—and I can do this most effectively in partnership with my school media specialist.

FAMILY LITERACY: LITERACY BEGINS AT BIRTH

One determiner of a child's ultimate literacy level is the level of his "family literacy." Family literacy is a broad term that, according to the International Reading Association, "encompasses the ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community," and it may be "initiated purposefully by a parent, or may occur spontaneously as parents and children go about the business of their daily lives" (Sapin & Padak, 1998, p. 5). Highly literate parents who enjoy reading both privately and aloud to their children are more likely to make family literacy a natural part of their family life: to model leisure reading, to read to children from an early age, to take children to library story time, to have many age-appropriate books available in the home, even to simply engage them in conversation about ideas and experiences. But the less literate parent, who might not be aware of the importance of engaging children in

literacy activities, may not have the skills or the resources to provide the experience. Thus the cycle of low literacy (or illiteracy) perpetuates itself throughout generations.

Family literacy programs for low-literacy and/or low-income parents vary widely. They might include actual reading instruction for the parent, family sessions at schools or libraries during which reading activities for children are modeled for parents, or home visits from child literacy specialists. Programs such as Project: LEARN, a one-on-one tutoring program for parents, address parents' own low literacy (Sapin & Padak, 1998); Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) provides free books to children and promotes activities to help children become life-long readers (Sapin & Padak, 1998); Parents as Teachers (PAT) includes both on-site training and home visits to "empower parents to give their children the best possible start in life" (Sapin & Padak, 1998, p. 2-22).

All of these family literacy programs stem from the recognition that the parent is the child's first and most important teacher and that language-rich experience is essential for children, beginning in infancy.

EARLY LITERACY: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

The ultimate goal of family literacy (and education in general) is to make children skilled readers and writers, and the very first steps they take toward this goal occur in infancy, well before they encounter books in a way that a casual observer might call "meaningful." Research in emergent literacy tells us that play actually promotes the kind of brain development in infants that helps "foster reading readiness" (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003, p. 42). *The Essential Guide to Children's Books and Their Creators* (2002) points out, "The human brain is not fully developed at birth . . . [and] since most synapses, or neural connections, are formed during the first three years of life, early experiences are crucial" (p.133). During infancy and early childhood, human interaction that involves language—talking, singing, reciting nursery rhymes, and reading—promotes brain cell connections as well as the formation of new brain cells ("Raising Readers," 1999). Hence, the infant or toddler whose environment is language rich already has significant advantage in his or her journey toward literacy.

In the first year of life a child will, ideally, lay both the intellectual and emotional groundwork for literacy. In a sensory-stimulating environment she will hear parents' voices and music and begin to make positive emotional associations with language. Talking to a baby, smiling when she coos, cuddling her while singing all work to instill in her a connection between language and love. Along with this emotional link comes the baby's own emerging language experimenta-

tion and development: cooing, beginning at about two months, followed by babbling, then "advanced babbling, with sentence-like phrasing," and then, finally, at about one year, the use of actual words (Rath & Kennedy, 2004, p. 34).

Books should be a part of an infant's life from birth since playing with books can foster literacy. Sturdy cloth or board books, which the child can look at, hold and manipulate, and chew on, are made for this purpose. Furthermore, children in their first year of life should be read to. Even at this young age, reading provides rich mental and emotional experience for the child: He points and responds to pictures, learns the concept of turning pages, and develops the connection between books and fun. In fact, "reading aloud to young children is so critical that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that doctors prescribe reading activities . . . at regular check-ups" ("Raising Readers," 1999, Doctors Prescribe Reading section).

As a child moves into the pre-school years, the steps in the literacy process become more obvious. Language acquisition moves at a rate that sometimes astounds us. Interest in books becomes more focused and sustained. Long before children can actually read text, they come to understand "directionality," the idea that the print moves from left to right across the page, which "becomes important as children begin to connect letters with sound and sort out letter-sound relationships" (Owocki, 2001, p.12). They become familiar with prediction, an important reading strategy, and are absorbing knowledge about grammar structures and vocabulary. It is also during these years, well before children enter kindergarten, that they begin to internalize the symbolic nature of reading and writing, coming to understand that print *means* something. A three-year-old can understand that "letters can be named; print carries meaning; there is a difference between drawing and writing; print [is] linear; [and] the letters in a string must vary" (Owocki, 2001, p.15). Ideally, by the time she enters school, much has already occurred in a child's life to pave the way to reading and writing.

ARRIVING AT SCHOOL WITH A DEFICIT

The child who does not come from a language- and text-rich home arrives at pre-school or kindergarten already behind his "family-literate" counter-parts. He is less likely to have been to new places (museums and zoos) where new experiences help build vocabulary and strengthen language skills (Rath & Kennedy, 2004). He has likely not had a number of books available to him at home, nor been read to regularly. Perhaps he has never visited the public library, which is abundant in just the resources he needs. He might be one of the children from a low-income family who enters first grade with only twenty-five hours of "one-

on-one picture book reading,” whereas his middle-class classmate has logged up to 1,700 hours (“Research on Early Literacy,” 2005, ¶ 4). He might be one of the 20% of American children living in poverty who, by age four, has “heard thirty-two million fewer words than children living in a professional home” (“Family Literacy and You,” 2006). These deficits, according to the statistics, will never be overcome.

WILL THIS CYCLE BE UNBROKEN?

The conclusion is obvious and disturbing: by the time the kindergarten teacher, or even the Head Start teacher, welcomes a child into the classroom, it is already too late—that child’s aptitude for reading and writing has already been formed. The “disadvantaged” child will start out behind, will never catch up, and will likely find limited success in school since the majority of school work is rooted in reading and writing. Negative, or at best, neutral, experiences with reading and writing will influence this child as she grows and becomes a parent, and her child is destined to the same fate.

Can literacy education during pre-parent years help break the cycle?

I look around at my classroom of non-college-bound juniors. One is expecting a baby soon. That means in five years her child will be entering a public school, probably the one in my community. If the mother is low-income, which is likely (at this point she is single, reads at about an eighth-grade level, and, of course, still doesn’t have a high school diploma), some limited early childhood and parenting resources are available to her within the community; she may or may not be aware of these resources. The public library has a good collection of parenting books and an excellent array of books and toys for children of all ages, as well as story time and other children’s activities. But she may not be aware of this resource, nor of the importance that early literacy exposure will play in her child’s future. Maybe if she knew how important it is to talk to her baby, she would do more of it. Maybe if she knew she should read to her baby from the very beginning, she would. Maybe if she knew which types of books are appropriate at which age, she would read to her child with more intention. Maybe if she knew the hard truth in the words that begin this article, she would understand in a new way the power and responsibility she has as a mother. Maybe if she knew about the cycle, she would make an effort to break it.

THE MEDIA SPECIALIST’S ROLE

A children’s literature unit in a suitable high school English class or in a child development class could provide some of the most appropriate education for the clientele: the low-literacy students who are likely to

remain in the community and have children within the next five years. The high school media specialist and the classroom teacher, working in tandem, could develop lessons which might include, along with some of the basic information covered here, instruction and practice in story telling and reading aloud and field trips to the local library and preschools. Lessons involving reading, discussing, and enjoying many children’s books together would acquaint students with the types and variety of books available and remind them of the fun of participating together in a learning community. Furthermore, because children’s literature is rich and often fairly sophisticated in its use of language and literary elements, such a study could simultaneously improve the students’ own literacy and their confidence in participating in family literacy practices.

The high school media specialist and the high school classroom teacher, in partnership, have the ability to make an impact on the learners furthest removed in age from their own students. We know what the low-literacy cycle is and how it perpetuates itself. We have the wherewithal—and therefore, the responsibility—to do what we can to break the cycle.

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