

THE PARENT/CHILD/TEACHER READING RELATIONSHIP

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Becoming a reader involves gaining the meaning of the activities involved which includes the purposes, values and roles that are part of the activity. At home literacy is contextualised and a child becomes aware of the uses and practises of reading in his or her culture. This home based literacy is a more natural form of literacy and must be distinguished from school based literacy which is a more organised, systematic literacy. Teachers need to be aware of the important role that preliteracy experience plays in a child's ability to learn to read successfully. They can then provide experiences that will help those children who come to school without the prerequisite emergent literacy skills to become good readers. Teachers will benefit from being aware of family literacy practices and encouraging parents to become involved in their children's reading, because this will help children to make reading and general literacy activities more meaningful. Children who become successful readers associate books with enjoyment and are therefore willing to make the effort to become readers. This is more likely to happen with the support from the family. Research indicates that a key predictor of student success is family involvement in children's education (Ginsburg, 1999:3).

Om 'n leser te word, hou in dat betekenis gevorm moet word van die aktiwiteite wat by lees betrokke is, nl die doel, waardes en rolle wat deel van die aktiwiteite. Geletterdheid word by die huis gekontekstualiseer en 'n kind word bewus van die gebruike van en praktyke vir lees in sy of haar kultuur. Hierdie huisgebaseerde geletterdheid is die natuurlikste vorm van geletterdheid en moet onderskei word van skoolgebaseerde geletterdheid wat 'n meer georganiseerde sistematiese soort geletterdheid is. Onderwysers moet bewus wees van die belangrike rol wat voor-geletterdheidservaring speel in 'n kind se vermoë om suksesvol te leer lees. Hulle kan dan geleenthede organiseer wat daardie kinders sal help wat sonder die voorvereiste ontlukende geletterdheidsvaardighede skool toe kom om goeie lesers te word. Onderwysers sal voordeel daaruit trek as hulle bewus is van gesinsgeletterdheidspraktyke en ouers aanmoedig om betrokke te raak by hulle kinders se leesontwikkeling omdat dit kinders sal help om lees en algemene geletterdheidsaktiwiteite meer betekenisvol te maak. Kinders wat suksesvolle lesers word, assosieer boeke met genot en daarom is hulle gewillig om moeite te doen om lesers te word. Dit sal makliker gebeur met die ondersteuning van die gesin. Navorsing dui daarop dat 'n sleutelvoorspeller van 'n leerder se leessukses sy gesin se betrokkenheid by hulle opvoeding is (Ginsburg, 1999:3).

INTRODUCTION

In this article the development of preliteracy skills will be outlined. Particular attention will be given to the role that the family plays in this development. In addition, suggestions will be made as to how teachers can address the needs of children who start school without the necessary preliteracy skills. Finally, family literacy programmes will be discussed and the methods teachers can use to implement these programmes to improve literacy achievement in their classroom.

SOCIALISATION OF LITERACY

Early language development occurs as children act to make sense of their world and the social and cultural practices experienced in everyday activities. This making of meaning by children may be described as a dynamic process of co-construction in which cultural activities are interpreted through the guidance given by significant others, such as their parents (McNaughton, 1995:3).

In some homes, family practices actively foster the literacy development of children through the creation of particular sets of experiences and opportunities. Socialisation or initiation into literacy practices occurs directly when the child is the focus of the activity. An example is reading to the child in which the child's interests and needs are the central focus. Here the concern is to make the text accessible to the child. Socialisation also occurs indirectly when the child observes family members using reading and writing in everyday activities. In these cases the child is an observer rather than an active participator (McNaughton 1995:18). These opportunities help the child to perceive the cultural and social role of reading and writing in various contexts.

EMERGENT LITERACY

In some cases, many of the skills needed for successfully learning to read are consciously taught through the process of a parent or caregiver reading aloud to a child. In shared reading between an adult and a child, also referred to as 'lapreading', labelling, scaffolding and repetition play an important role in the child's early language development. 'Labelling' is the term given to the process in which parents point to pictures, name vocabulary items and begin a give-and-take dialogue with their child (Ninio & Bruner 1978). This may be described as one of the first literacy 'games' that parents play with children. Parents and caregivers continue to expand and extend the lexical and syntactical features of their child's language through scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). The term 'scaffold' usefully emphasises the supportive and constructive nature of the interactions. For example, in response to the child's saying, 'Look, a bus' the parent may reply, 'Yes, it's a big red bus'.

In what is considered the ideal progression, there is a gradual transfer of responsibility from the expert to the novice with the child gradually initiating labelling and even questioning. During these shared reading sessions the child receives personal one-on-one time, learning new vocabulary with contextualised clues given by the pictures in books and through discussions with adults. In such situations the child is likely to develop a positive attitude towards reading as something that is both enjoyable and valuable.

It seems that as the child grows older and the parent starts reading actual stories to the child; the kind of interaction and style of reading has a measurable effect on the child's literacy development (Stoll 1998:24). The most advantageous approach seems to be for the parent to first encourage the child to interrupt whenever the child wishes to ask something about the story or to offer comment. Gradually the parent encourages the child to listen to the whole story without interruption thus developing the child's concentration. The parent also starts to ask the child why, what and where questions preparing the child for the type of questions that teachers will ask at school. These questions encourage the child to focus on certain aspects of the story such as causal links which help to teach the child to identify important elements of a story. The closer reading a story replicates the type of activities children will be exposed to at school the more successful a child will be once he or she starts school (Heath, 1983).

The process of reading books exposes a child to more complex, more elaborate and decontextualised language than almost any other kind of verbal interaction. Rereading books gives children the opportunity to internalise new vocabulary and language structures. Repetition of formulaic phrases serves as a basis for language acquisition as well. Children focus on different aspects of the story each time they hear it reread (Stoll, 1998).

The language development features - labelling, scaffolding and repetition - all play a key role in the child's early language acquisition. It is not surprising that being read to in the home is regarded as the best single predictor of future academic success. Children who are read to in the way described above are more able to relate to books and the requirements of literacy at school. Enthusiasm for reading will in turn ensure that as school learners they will be regular readers who become better readers (Krashen, 1989; 1993; 1995).

To sum up, emergent literacy development or the reading and writing behaviours that precede and develop into conventional literacy is vital. Children learn how to hold a book properly, to turn the pages, and to interpret the pictures and gradually learn that the text is written from the top to the bottom of the page and from left to right. They learn to sit still and concentrate on a story for short periods of time. Reading books fosters the ability to listen and teaches the social behaviour that accompanies reading instruction. Reading to children provides opportunities to learn how books convey meaning. It gives children the opportunity to internalise schemata or frameworks related to text. Listening to stories also extends their ability to produce or retell a story verbally. It is very important that children understand how a story works and the basic schema for a story as this reflects the way much other text is structured as well (Machet, 1994, 1995).

Reading to children does not only affect the child's affective, and literacy literacy development. Cognitive development is fostered through the kind of exposure to knowledge about the outside world that is often beyond the experiences of the child. It also helps children to distinguish between contextualised first hand experiences and decontextualised representations of experiences written in books. Children become aware of the difference in the sound of the contextualised language of oral conversations and the decontextualised language written in books. It allows children to observe and practice the comprehension strategies of an expert reader (Klesius & Griffith, 1996:553). Linguistic development is encouraged as reading will increase vocabulary acquisition and syntactic structures are strengthened (Elley, 1989; Feitelson *et al.*, 1986). Research shows that the vocabulary used in books is more extensive than everyday vocabulary to which a child will be exposed. Vocabulary in books also tends to be more abstract.

CONTRACTS AND METACONTRACTS OF LITERACY

Reading and comprehending texts depend on many tacit or implied ways of handling, interacting with and interpreting books which are accepted by literate people. These concern the use of books and the meaning of texts - and have very little to do with the ability to decipher a particular written word (Snow & Nineo, 1986:121). Snow and Nineo (1986:121) term these the contracts and metacontracts of literacy. Some of these are:

- Books are for reading not manipulating unlike other objects.
- In book reading the book is in control: the reader is led and the book is dominant.
- Pictures are not things but representatives of things. The nature of book input is symbolic.
- Pictures are for naming and the appropriate behaviour is that pictures and words are to be read.
- Pictures though static can represent events. Children are taught to relate several pictorial components to each other in order to see the emergent whole. This teaches the child narrative structure and sequencing.
- Books constitute an autonomous fictional world and book time is separate and takes place outside real time.

- (Snow & Nineo, 1986: 121-136).

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO COMPENSATE FOR LACK OF PRELITERACY?

The experience of literacy discussed thus far the preserve of the few. Few children are read to by parents and caregivers before entering school. Even in a developed country, like America, only half the infants and toddlers are read to by their parents (Trelease, 1995:48). In developing countries, like South Africa, the number of children whose parents read to them is inevitably far smaller. Constraints such as a high rate of illiteracy and parents' lack of discretionary income to buy books for their children. While at an earlier stage of our history, most black children enjoyed the rich experience of the oral culture of storytelling - an important preliteracy experience - this is no longer true. Parents who live in the cities are too busy and too tired in the evenings to spend time telling young children stories and they feel that their oral culture of storytelling does not have a value in today's high-tech world. Thus many South African children are deprived of any form of storytelling (Machet & Olën, 1997). This means that many children in South Africa start school without the necessary preliteracy skills. Unless the teacher systematically helps children gain these preliteracy skills, many of these children will struggle to acquire literacy skills or use these skills in a meaningful way. Too often in the reception year the focus is on decoding rather than making meaning out of text (see, for instance Plüddemann, 1999) and for those who lack preliteracy skills the jump between decoding and making meaning out of text may not be made.

It is important to introduce children to literacy activities as early in their schooling as possible. This is of particular importance in communities where socio-economic conditions are such that children are not exposed to books and book-related activities such as storytelling and reading aloud before they enter primary school. Research indicates (Olën & Machet, 1997) that younger children make more progress than older children and intervention strategies are more effective if used with younger children. These children may be more easily motivated to develop the reading habit.

In order to find out whether a child has preliteracy experience teachers could ask parents about the child's favourite book. A child who has been exposed to books will usually be able to name a favourite. For those without favourites, teachers could suggest the family borrow books, show parents the range of books available for young children and explain the importance of children having the opportunity and encouragement to choose a favourite book.

If the school does not have books available to loan to parents, teachers may be able to suggest that parents join a public or community library. Schools should work together with librarians and can perhaps arrange that the librarian comes to speak to parents and introduce them to the services of a public or community library. Many parents are nervous of joining a library because they are unaware of how they operate or intimidated by the size and formality of the library. It may also be possible for the school to arrange for block loans for the class and then children can take the books from the school instead of having to go to the library.

Since access to books is a critical factor in early literacy development, it is a good idea to send books home regularly with children. It is particularly important to ensure that children read books other than 'readers'. If possible, in areas where there is a high rate of illiteracy books should be issued together with a cassette tape of someone reading the story if the family has a cassette player. The cassette must be issued automatically with the book so that a child who comes from an illiterate home does not have to admit this. The parent then does not have to feel inadequate if they cannot read. This experiment was carried out in England with preschool children with very successful results (Gaines, 1995). Not only did the children perform better once they got to school in terms of learning to read, but it had an additional effect of improving older siblings literacy as they would listen to the tape together with the child and follow the story in the book. Younger siblings are also exposed to stories and books at an earlier age. This method is important even for children who do not come from illiterate homes as many parents work and still have household chores when they get back home so they often do not have the time or energy to read to the child.

Where possible there should be a classroom collection of books available for children to use. Even where a central collection exists, a classroom collection is often the most effective means of making sure that suitable books are easily available for the children to read. There are many other advantages of a classroom collection beyond easy accessibility. Preselection can ensure that the books are sufficiently varied and attractive to cater for the particular children in that classroom.

An important factor to be considered when selecting books for a classroom collection is accessibility of text and illustrations. The text has to be simple taking into account that it is intended for new readers many of whom may be reading in a second language. Some texts are deceptively simple in that sentences are simplified by leaving out causal connections such as 'because'. However, these texts are often more difficult for the child to understand because of implicit assumptions that the child may be unable to follow. The text should be carefully examined not only for vocabulary but also for hidden assumptions that the child may not be in a position to understand. Books that reflect situations and characters that the children are able to identify with and give the children positive role models should be included (Machet, 1994; 1995). Research indicates that children have a more positive attitude towards reading if characters in a book reflect the ethnicity, life style and values of the readers (Saracho & Dayton, 1991:43; Shelley-Robinson, 1996:16). It is important to ensure that the books selected for the classroom collection are as appealing as possible because the children may need every possible motivation to read. There should be books to cater for children of all

abilities. Even the weakest reader should be able to find a suitable book but the more competent readers in the class should be stretched.

Some activities that teachers can undertake to increase preliteracy skills in the reception year are:

- spending time mediating stories and asking questions which require learners to predict events and outcomes or make inferences so that they are better able to understand causal relationships and narrative structures.
- paying attention to the linking words which help to indicate relationships such as cause and effect, words like 'because', 'however', 'therefore', 'nevertheless', and so on.
- spending time reading to children and exposing them to books. Many teachers feel that reading story books to children is a waste of valuable classroom time, or is at least dispensable when there is important 'work' to be done. However, Elley (1989; 1991) is only one of the researchers who has shown that that reading stories to children helps to improve their command of language, vocabulary and grammatical structures.

It is vital that the teacher engage in scaffolding (Bruner, 1986; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) in the form of modelling and thinking aloud. Thinking aloud in front of a class is especially useful since it serves to demonstrate the process of reading to learners. For instance, if she might muse aloud about how she predicts that certain things are likely to happen in the story from looking at the clues in the first page (pictures and title, for instance). Before learners begin to read a story, she can remind them to use this strategy. If necessary, closer mediation can be given one-to-one or in small groups to help learners who need it.

ROLE OF FAMILY LITERACY

The concept of family literacy has become increasingly popular in the last few years. Research indicates (McNaughton, 1995; Topping, 1995) that collaboration between teachers and family can be very successful. Parents or caregivers can be of valuable assistance in helping the child to become literate with the teacher's guidance. Family literacy programmes in Britain and America have demonstrated the value of involving parents in the literacy process (Auerbach 1995; Come & Fredericks, 1995; Morrow & Young, 1997; Paratore, 1995). Family literacy initiatives need to take into account the cultural norms within the family, but programmes that are culturally appropriate can work very successfully. Parents should be trained as to the most effective way to help their children attain literacy. Teachers need to talk to parents about literacy occurring as part of everyday family activities at home; the parent's role in providing opportunities and resources; the need for parents to act as a model for literacy and to interact with the child on literacy. Research in family literacy elsewhere indicates that the parents of children who are not performing well at school want to equip them with linguistic, social and cultural skills, but often are unaware of how to do so. However, parents appreciate being told of the importance of sharing and reading books with their young children (Edwards, 1995:563) as long as the programmes do not create the impression that they are blaming the learner nor imply that the homes of these families are lacking in literacy. Parents are a major ingredient in literacy development (Come & Fredericks, 1995:567). Family literacy programmes should encourage a range of literacy activities. Holdaway defined four processes that enable learners to acquire literacy abilities: observation of literacy behaviours (ie being read to or seeing others read and write); collaboration or the social interaction of the learner with other individuals who provide

encouragement, motivation or help; practice, in which the learner tries out what has been learned by reading and writing alone or with others; and performance, in which the learner shares what he or she has accomplished and seeks guidance or approval from supportive, interested others (Morrow & Young 1997:736).

There are a range of programs which have been tried out. Programmes which are especially effective in terms of supplementing preliteracy skills are those that

- teach parents about the educational system and philosophy of schooling;
- provide parents with concrete methods and materials to use at home with children
- assist parents to promote 'good reading habits';
- work with parents on the development of their own basic literacy skills;
- train parents on how to read to children or listen to children read;
- give parents a recipe book of ideas for shared literacy activities; and
- teach parents to make and play games to reinforce skills.

(Auerbach 1995:13-14).

MANAGING FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMMES

Family literacy programmes can be set up by a teacher in any community with relative ease and for reasonably little cost. Programmes should be based on the principle of mutual support. Teachers, who are used to being in a position of authority, may initially find it difficult to treat parents or other caregivers as equal partners. However research shows that the most successful programmes are those that take parents' and caregiver's needs into account, as well as those of the children. By working with a family or caregiver unit, one can address attitudes and behaviours and their effect on children's educational performance.

In order to set up a family literacy programme the educator needs to follow certain steps.

- S/he should first arrange a meeting with parents, caregivers and any other stakeholders to discuss the aims of the programme and the benefits for the child. It is important for the teacher to have a clear idea of what s/he to achieve and how parents or other caregivers can help achieve the objective of enhancing the child's preliteracy skills.
- Parents are equal partners in the programme and cognisance should be taken of their input.
- Although parents are often enthusiastic to begin with the teacher has to ensure that this interest is maintained and encouraged. It is, therefore, essential to have regular meetings, follow-up sessions and workshops to address individual and common problems.
- Record keeping, indicating the frequency of the activity as well as time spent on the activity should be encouraged. Children's reaction to books read should be also be recorded. This could be as simple as indicating a smiley face or a down-turned face indicating enjoyment or non-enjoyment. Although a beginner reader is not often able to articulate why a book has been enjoyed or not enjoyed, this skill will develop. Therefore, from the beginning there should be a place for parent's or caregiver's comments on the children's reactions to and feelings about the stories read to them.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMMES

Parents can be involved in various activities in the reception year at school. Parents and grandparents can be invited to visit the school and tell stories to children or read to small groups of children. The use of parents and grandparents makes it possible to replicate the intimacy of the parent reading a story to a child which is not possible for the teacher to do in large classes. This enables the child, who has been deprived of this experience at home, to participate fully and share in the book. Large format books ('Big Books'), such as those published as part of the balanced literacy programmes are ideal as even children sitting at a distance can see the text and the pictures.

When children progress to the point where they are able to read by themselves, paired reading programmes have been shown to be very successful. Research, however, suggests that parents (or older siblings) need guidance on the best way to read with children for the activity to have the maximum positive effect. Paired reading is particularly suitable since it is a relatively requires tutor and tutee initially to read out loud together in close synchrony. The pace is adjusted to the tutee's pace as necessary. Errors are corrected simply by the tutor reading the word correctly and the tutee repeating it. When the tutee feels sufficiently confident to read a section of text on his or her own, the tutee signals this to the tutor with a nudge or any other appropriate non-verbal signal. The tutor praises the tutee for taking this initiative, and subsequently praises the tutee regularly especially for mastering difficult words or spontaneously self-correcting. Initially reading is done simultaneously but as the tutee gains self-confidence and expertise more independent reading occurs (Topping, 1995: 7). Paired reading has been shown to have positive affects on the development of children's word recognition, comprehension and attitude to reading (Topping, 1995). In a research programme carried out in South Africa in which paired reading combined with mediation was tested with a disadvantaged group, a significant improvement in the children's reading was achieved (Overett & Donald, 1998). Parental tutoring provides support which is adjustable, temporary and dynamic. The learner's performance should become increasingly self-regulated (McNaughton, 1995: 85).

CONCLUSION

Parents play an important role not only in their children's success in learning to read but in encouraging them to become lifelong readers. Children begin learning from the time they are born. By the time they come to school they have already had six to seven years to learn about their world and the role that literacy plays in that world. Unfortunately many children will come to school lacking important preliteracy experience and have very little idea of the role that reading and writing can play in their lives. However, teachers can encourage parents to play an active role in their children's literacy experience and learning. Research conducted in South Africa has shown that many parents are eager to do whatever they can to ensure their children's success at school. Teachers must help them to become active partners in helping their children become readers.

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