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ABSTRACT

Breaking the continuing cycle of low literacy levels transmitted from one generation to another is the philosophy behind family and intergenerational literacy programs. This Practice Brief describes some of the family literacy program models that are proving effective. It also summarizes strategies and resources that can help practitioners. The brief begins with the issue of the definitions of literacy and purposes of literacy education, pointing out that many program developers and researchers advocate respecting cultural differences and multiple meanings of literacy, and supporting educational achievement without undermining the family as a cultural resource. Effective program models are then described by type of intervention; the four models are: adults direct-children direct services; adults indirect-children indirect services; adults direct-children indirect; and adults indirect-children direct, with examples of each. Strategies for practitioners include determining audience to be served, recruiting through emphasizing the benefits to children, providing high-interest subject matter and guest speakers, and giving literacy program participants suitable recognition. (14 references) (KC)

Family Literacy Programs and Practices

Practice Application Brief

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF

by Sandra Kerka
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Family Literacy Programs and Practices

Breaking the continuing cycle of low literacy levels transmitted from one generation to another is the philosophy behind family and intergenerational literacy programs. Evidence from a number of fields continues to support the crucial role of early literacy experiences to children's success with reading and writing (Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center [ILRDC] 1990; Martin 1991; Nickse 1990). A wide variety of family literacy programs have emerged, focusing in different ways on improving the literacy of both parent and child. This ***Practice Application Brief*** describes some of the program models that are proving effective. It also summarizes strategies and resources that can help practitioners.

Deficit versus Empowerment

The definitions of literacy and purposes of literacy education are controversial issues. Particularly criticized are programs based on the "deficit" model, in which low-literate people are viewed as lacking mainstream values and attitudes about literacy and education, a deficit perpetuated across generations. Literacy needs are more often defined economically (based on the skill needs of employers) rather than humanistically (Edlund 1992). In terms of family literacy, this perspective is often interpreted to mean that low-literate parents have inadequate parental skills (Weinstein-Shr 1991).

Many program developers and researchers advocate the importance of respecting cultural differences in child-rearing practices; recognizing the multiple meanings, uses, and values of literacy; and focusing on supporting educational achievement without undermining the family as a cultural resource (ibid.). This approach recognizes family strengths and the empowerment of individuals as the goal of literacy education, respecting adults as parents while attempting to give them and their children the tools of literacy in a meaningful context. The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL 1991) is now using a "strengths" model, based on the idea that adults whose strengths are appreciated are more motivated for their own and their children's learning.

A multidisciplinary approach to family literacy encompassing experts from many fields is a comprehensive way of meeting multiple learner needs: adult and child literacy, family support services that can alleviate immediate survival concerns that impede concentration on learning, and skills to enhance economic self-sufficiency (Edlund 1992; Nickse 1990). The ILRDC (1990) classifies family program models according to two ways of providing interdisciplinary services: (1) networking--linkages among various agencies and programs providing different parts and (2) center-based, comprehensive case management services.

Effective Program Models

Another way of classifying family/intergenerational programs (Nickse 1990) is by type of intervention (direct, indirect) and type of participation, which yields four models: adults direct-children direct, adults indirect-children indirect, adults direct-children indirect, and adults indirect-children direct. Examples of the four types are given here.

Adults Direct-Children Direct

Programs in this category provide instruction to both adults and children and have a high degree of interaction. Sayers and Brown (1991) describe an innovative example that builds upon the language and cultural strengths of participants. At sites in San Diego, Denver, and Puerto Rico, ethnic and linguistically minority parents and children learned such computer applications as word processing and electronic mail and communicated with parents and children at the other sites. Bilingual parents' self-esteem and confidence were boosted by others' reliance upon their Spanish proficiency. A number of products were produced jointly: bilingual guidelines for parent-teacher conferences, an international book of proverbs culled from extended families, and booklets about the culture of each city and neighborhood involved.

Adults Indirect-Children Indirect

This form emphasizes short-term literacy enrichment events that present reading as a fun activity and a means of sharing. Two examples of intergenerational programs are of this type. Russian Jewish immigrants enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) classes at a Philadelphia senior center were paired in three projects with English-speaking middle school students (Adams and Lubold 1989). They viewed a play and film about the immigrant experience followed by discussion, and students conducted interviews with the seniors comparing their cultural experiences. The seniors served as teacher or authority on their culture and experience while practicing their English speaking and listening skills. The students were exposed to elderly life-styles and motivations for immigrating. In Budnik's (1991) project, volunteers from a retirement center read to preschoolers in a day care center daily. Parents were provided information and assistance in reading to children and home literacy activities, and the day care center's library was expanded from 40 to 354 books.

Adults Direct-Children Indirect

Many examples of this type exist, in which adults receive formal literacy instruction as well as coaching on influencing children's literacy. Child-rearing instruction is often a component. The Casa Aztlan Reading Circle in Chicago (ILRDC 1990) demonstrates the empowerment approach to family literacy. Using Freire's problem-posing method, staff and students discuss and rework student ideas; transcriptions of the discussions become the "textbook" for one-to-one tutoring and ESL classes. The emphasis is on literacy in the first language (Spanish) as the foundation for literacy in English.

The Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC 1991) and the Carnegie Library's Beginning with Books (BWB) program collaborate on the Read Together project. While BWB volunteers read to children, their parents attend GPLC tutoring at library branches. GPLC uses the expertise of BWB staff to train tutors in family literacy, adding such elements as parenting, techniques for reading to children, and use of children's literature to the adult tutoring program.

When family literacy programs say "parents," they often mean "mothers." However, research does support the impact of male role models on children's educational development. However, lacking male role models themselves, some fathers stereotype reading as a feminine activity. Martin (1991) reports on a project that specifically targets disadvantaged fathers, teaming literacy instruction and family counseling to combat these perceptions and support men as parents. Techniques used include language experience stories created by the

fathers; common household reading matter such as equipment instruction booklets, maps, and games; and a sourcebook of high interest reading materials that encourage exploration of family heritage and learning together about school culture.

Adults Indirect-Children Direct

Focus of these programs is on teaching prereading or reading to children, often in preschool, elementary, after-school, or summer programs. Parents may be involved in workshops or recognition ceremonies and may receive information on helping their children, but do not receive direct literacy instruction. Chrysler's Running Start (Nickse 1990) encourages children to read 21 books through such incentives as free books and challenge contests. At Reading Rallies, parents receive practical tips and take-home materials on helping children read.

Strategies and Resources for Practice

The programs described here and many other descriptions available in the ERIC database are a rich resource of suggestions about what works for family literacy practitioners. Some ideas are summarized here.

Audience. People with low levels of literacy are a heterogeneous group, ranging from pregnant teens and teen parents to older single parents, immigrants and refugees, and U.S. citizens of diverse cultural backgrounds. This diversity implies that definition of needs and programs to serve them are best not predetermined, but derived in collaboration with the learners themselves (NCFL 1991; Weinstein-Shr 1991).

Recruitment and Retention. Successful recruitment often hinges on emphasizing the benefits to children. Sayers and Brown's (1991) project was advertised as an evening class "for children," who could participate only if accompanied by parents. Another key factor was identified in Popp's (1991b) research: Parents persisted in those family literacy programs that addressed their sense of alienation from school. ILRDC (1990) recommends recruiting in public assistance offices, churches, workplaces, bowling alleys, bars, crisis shelters, health clinics, pediatricians' offices, and door to door. Public service announcements on radio and television are often more effective than written materials. Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA 1991) stresses a short-term initial commitment of only six sessions and offers informal sample minicourses as a tryout. Several sources recommend keeping the word "literacy" out of program titles (GPLC 1991; LVA 1991), stressing instead "families," "reading," "children," "books." Meaningful, useful incentives include child care, transportation assistance, meals and refreshments, free books or book coupons, and field trips (ibid.). Program locations should be convenient, unthreatening, and, ideally, homelike (LVA 1991).

Subject Matter. High-interest subject matter is important for all students, and Martin (1991) suggests that this is especially so for males. Besides child care information, curriculum, reading materials, and guest speakers could be provided on such topics as engine repair, fire safety, physical fitness, cooking with children (GPLC 1991). Student involvement in choice of reading material (Martin 1991), curriculum development (ILRDC 1990), and creation of reading material (Sayers and Brown 1991) is also important. Technology is a proven method for retaining student interest and providing effective instruction. Uses of technology in family literacy programs include videotapes, books on tape, and computer usage instruction (ibid.). At Nissan Family Learning Centers (Nickse 1990), two kinds of software form the basis of the curriculum: Writing to Read for children and Principles of the Alphabet Learning System for adults.

Recognition. Meaningful forms of recognition reinforce learning and self-esteem. Examples include books, certificates of achievement, media events, letters of commendation from employers, parties, and copies of student-created publications. Recognition for volunteer tutors should not be forgotten (GPLC 1991).

Resources. Popp (1991a) describes sources of funding for family literacy programs. Lane, Laskowski, and McDougall (1991) provide examples of community and family life materials appropriate for use in family programs. LVA's (1991) manual is a source of practical information and examples of forms.

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