

FORUM

FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS LEAD TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Margaret Mulhern; Flora Rodriguez-Brown; Timothy Shanahan
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The following article is excerpted from the NCBE Program Information Guide, *Family Literacy for Language Minority Families: Issues for Program Implementation* (in press), which describes Project FLAME, a successful family literacy program operating in six elementary schools in Chicago, Illinois.

Faced with the challenge of educating an increasingly diverse student population, educators are looking beyond the school walls toward families and communities as resources for fostering academic success for all students. Though families have always played an important role in promoting the academic success of their children (Swap 1993), changing demographics have forced schools to rethink the ways in which they reach out to families. Parents can play many roles in their children's education, including: providing for physical and emotional needs, assuring school attendance, participating as volunteers or taking part in school governance activities, providing materials and space for their children to do homework, and serving as models for using literacy and other knowledge. Parents also play the role of teacher, either directly, by teaching their children to count or write their names, for example, or indirectly, by reading and talking to them.

Several factors can disrupt or prevent parents from taking on these roles in their children's educational development. According to Swap (1993), potential barriers to involvement include difficult family circumstances, school norms that do not support partnerships, limited resources, and a lack of information about how to establish successful home-school relations. Family literacy programs have great potential for overcoming these barriers.

Barriers to Family Involvement

Over the past few decades demographic changes—including substantial increases in the numbers of mothers working outside the home, single parent families, and language minority children enrolled in American schools—have altered the configuration of the family. These changes affect parents' abilities to be involved in children's schooling in several ways: working parents may have less time to attend and participate in school activities; financial constraints limit the education resources families can provide and may lead parents to work longer hours; and language minority parents' school participation may also be hindered by their own limited proficiency in English, lack of formal education experiences, or lack of familiarity with the United States' culture and education system.

Given these social contexts, language minority parents are often reluctant to contact teachers about their children's education. Many Latino and Asian parents, for example, view teachers as pedagogical experts and, therefore, are unlikely to interfere in what they view as the teacher's domain (Flores, Cousin, and Diaz 1991; Yao 1988). Unfortunately, this may, in turn, be misinterpreted by teachers as ambivalence toward the education process. Yet research indicates that these families are highly concerned and willing to help their children succeed in school, but uncertain of how to do so (Delgado-Gaitan 1990; Epstein 1990; Goldenberg and Gallimore 1991).

New ways must be found to bridge the home-school gap for linguistic/cultural minority and low-income families. Research shows that school policies and teacher practices can determine whether parents participate in their children's education without regard to race, parent education, family size, marital status, or grade level (Epstein 1990). Schools, then, can play a critical role by reaching out to families to inform them about school practices and to build on home cultures as resources for teaching and learning.

Family Literacy

Family literacy programs can serve to forge closer ties between homes and schools for the purpose of increasing adult literacy skills and student achievement. They are based on the notion that literacy, because it is social and cultural in nature, is best developed within the context of the family. They situate literacy learning within the context of daily family life, acknowledge a broad range of culturally influenced ways of knowing, and provide greater access and comfort in dealing with schools.

Family literacy programs are unique in that they offer simultaneous and connected education opportunities for both adults and children (Shanahan, Mulhern, and Rodriguez-Brown, submitted). Any program that includes literacy that can be used in the family context could be referred to as a family literacy program. Auerbach (1989) broadly defines family literacy to include direct parent-child interactions based around literacy tasks as well as opportunities for parents to develop their literacy abilities by focusing on pertinent issues such as family and community problems, child-rearing concerns, home language and culture, and interactions with the school system. Family literacy is not limited to projects that focus on the development of young children's literacy, though many programs do limit their scope to only include families with preschool or primary grade children.

Family literacy programs have proliferated over the past decade, yet there is no one model that exemplifies all the possible configurations of parent-child learning situations. Successful programs do, however, share several characteristics. These include: addressing parents' personal goals, valuing families' home languages, viewing families from a resource model rather than a deficit model, providing families access to information and resources that will encourage success for children, and encouraging shared literacy experiences in homes rather than imposing a school-like transfer of skills from parent to child (Ada 1988; Auerbach 1989; Paratore, in press; Quintero and Huerta-Macias 1990; Shanahan and Rodriguez-Brown 1993).

Conclusion

Family literacy is a new and exciting arena for improving the relationships between language minority families and schools by situating learning experiences in the context of the family. Designing and carrying out such programs requires a commitment that goes beyond traditional investments in improving home-school partnerships. We must look for new ways to provide useful and appropriate information about their children's learning to parents who were not educated in this country, and we must learn to draw on the resources that families can offer in bridging the home-school gap. Although family literacy programs often focus more on changing how families relate to schools, they must also begin to influence changes in the schools so that they better respond to the realities of the families' lives. As the field of family literacy develops, it has the chance to play a pivotal role in reshaping the education of language minority children, a difficult yet critical challenge.

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