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Research on family reading: an international perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of international research in the field of family reading, a subject which refers both to the development of the literacy skills of family members, and to their shared process of reading. It begins by defining the key terms in family reading, then introduces the research methods employed in research in this area. Research specifically focusing on parents is presented, with particular reference to young parents and fathers in prison. The issue of intergenerational reading is also introduced, whereby (in this instance) the young and the elderly share experiences via reading. The final theme of the paper is that of families sharing reading for pleasure, and public reading events for families are described. The paper concludes with a series of barriers to family reading, and a suggested model of effective family reading, for families and communities in any country.

Key terms: *Family reading, family literacy, intergenerational literacy, family learning, literacy research, reading for pleasure.*

I have been asked to speak to you today about research on family reading, an important aspect of the work of libraries throughout the world, but one which can take many different forms. Before I begin to talk about specific work in this area I feel that it would be helpful to go through some of the widely accepted definitions of the key terms, as each of us in this room may understand them in a slightly different way.

DEFINITIONS

'Family reading' can be interpreted in two main ways; firstly, as family members supporting each other in the development of their literacy skills, and secondly, as family members sharing their enjoyment of reading and storytelling. We will consider both of these today.

'Family literacy' is concerned with literacy activities involving at least two generations. In general a family literacy program will have three components - literacy for children (including study skills), literacy for parents, and guidance for adults on how to encourage the literacy skills of their children or young relatives.

'Intergenerational literacy' refers to 'the efforts of second – and third – generation adults in a family (usually an extended family) to help themselves or others in the family learn to read and write.' (Harris & Hodges, 1995: 120[i])
'Family learning': although there is a long tradition of parents and other adults encouraging and supporting children's educational progress, fewer have had the opportunity to develop their own learning alongside that of the young people, as a family.

AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY READING AND LITERACY RESEARCH

Relatively recently, reading research has broadened in scope to consider the way in which social contexts influence reading ability. The development of reading skills is now accepted to occur not only in the classroom, but also within social settings, at home and in the wider community.

International research provides powerful demonstrations of the impact of the actions of young people and family members as they combine languages, literacies and cultural practices from a variety of contexts. In many studies grounded in 'real world settings', in other words, beyond the school gates, children's learning is supported and in turn supports the learning of others, in ways that are not necessarily recognised or understood within the school. In a study from 2004 investigating storytelling with Latin American elders and young people, Olmedo[ii] suggests that children and their communities 'have something to offer which is relevant to what is taught', and that a teacher could make an effort to understand that he/she is a mediator of a young person's learning and just one member, albeit an essential one, of that person's entire learning community.

RESEARCH METHODS IN FAMILY READING

In order to understand research in family reading, it is necessary to have a degree of awareness of the methods used to conduct it. This is not an appropriate time to go into significant detail, but you may find it useful for me to cover two key points.

Firstly, a large amount of research in family reading and family literacy is conducted using ethnographic methods. Ethnography is literally 'a picture of the people', and studies a culture. Using observation, participation, comparison, and contrast, we are able to exploit our visits to unfamiliar places to learn about others' ways of life and to reflect on our own.[iii] Its relevance to the literacy researcher is that it allows him/her to think of literacy and reading not only within the four walls of the school, but as a practice which could be observed, learned and used within a community, and which leads to social and cultural identity.[iv]

Secondly, a common criticism by researchers of family literacy initiatives in the past 20 years has been that they have used what is described as the 'deficit model'[v]. This means that immigrant and refugee families were being taught via the traditional route, where information is transmitted in one direction only: from the school to the parents and then to the child. Auerbach[vi], for example, suggests that this makes many false assumptions which lead to a deficit model:

> *'The first assumption is that language-minority students come from literacy-impoverished homes where education is not valued or supported. The second assumption is that family literacy involves a one-way transfer of skills from parents to children. Third, this model assumes that success is determined by the parents' ability to support and extend school-like activities in the home. The fourth assumption is that school practices are adequate and that it is home factors that will determine who succeeds. And fifth, the model assumes that parents' own problems get in the way of creating positive family literacy contexts.*
>
> *… The danger is that, left unexamined, these assumptions will justify a model that blames the victim by attributing literacy problems largely to family inadequacies.'*

A new research model has therefore been developed, now known as the 'wealth model', which asks family literacy providers to find out which literacy patterns *already exist* within families and to build on those patterns, rather than to impose traditional, mainstream school-like activities on families. Unlike the previous model, this new model suggests that the family literacy 'curriculum' be based on the needs voiced by the family literacy clients. Auerbach (1989:176) suggests:

> *'In this alternative formulation…cultural differences are perceived as strengths and resources that can bridge the gap between home and school.'*

RESEARCH FOCUSING ON PARENTS

> *'…it seems reasonable to assume that if literacy becomes socially significant in the lives of the parents, it is likely to become socially significant in the lives of the children.'* (Taylor, 1983:88[vii])

Research in family reading shows that many parents underline the importance of talking and listening to their children when they are learning to read and write: the

word ‘reading’ is used in a wider sense. For example, some parents speak of their children reading, when it is understood that in the traditional sense of the word the children were certainly non-readers. A parent interviewed by one researcher spoke of his two children, ‘Kathy will read to Debbie or they’ll read together. I can hear them up there for an hour at a time, sometimes when they should be asleep.’ (Taylor, 1983:80). When he made this comment, his younger daughter was just three and a half years of age and certainly a non-reader.

In the late 1990s research was conducted to evaluate the impact of a programme at the University of Canberra in Australia, for children and adolescents with literacy difficulties. The programme, ‘Parents as Tutors’, worked through the children’s parents and also through groups of teachers taking postgraduate studies. The participating young people had poor achievement records, described as being ‘without much apparent chance of recovery’ (Kemp, 1996:75[viii]). In each school a group of parents were interested in and capable of giving support in the literacy curriculum. They may have been trained as listeners to oral reading, as story readers, or as assistants during writing sessions. The researchers suggested that the outcomes were very positive:

> *‘Bringing parents together with the mutual purpose of finding out what the problems are, who has them, what reasons there may be for them, and what some of the solutions are, seems to be a civilised way of meeting the special needs of their children.’* (87).

A significant point to be made here is that research data often suggest that teachers and the wider community feel that involving parents in the school curriculum is simply a low-cost way to sustain the education system, and that teachers themselves should be doing more work to help the children to read and to enjoy reading. This team of Australian researchers suggest that the argument should instead be:

> *‘…that schools have no business…in any way preventing parents and their children from having the mutual benefits of a three-way learning process from teacher to child to parent’* (87).

YOUNG PARENTS

Research undertaken in the past ten years underlines the obstacles facing the most vulnerable young people in society, including young offenders, those not participating in education, employment or training, teenage mothers, and those in or leaving residential care. Many young parents fall into one or more of these categories. In the UK, the scale of teenage pregnancy is higher than in any other Western country[ix], and research has shown that young parents, particularly mothers, are adversely affected by early parenthood:

> *‘Teenage parents are more likely than their peers to live in poverty and unemployment and be trapped in it through lack of education, child care and encouragement.*’[x]

Fortunately, government initiatives from departments such as the Social Exclusion Unit, working with partners including public library services, have developed learning provision to develop young people’s childcare, literacy and numeracy skills, and research has been conducted into its impact. Before attending learning provision, many young parents reported feelings of isolation. They wanted to do the best for their child and that often meant being with them all the time, and not trusting anyone

else to care for them. The result was that they and their child had limited social contact with others. After participation, researchers identified a wide range of positive outcomes, mainly related to increased self-confidence and self-esteem, an interest in reading and learning, and the development of parenting skills. This was followed by the social benefits for their children and their children's development through family learning.

THE ROLE OF FATHERS

Almost certainly because early childhood educators tend to engage more with mothers than with fathers, research into fathers' involvement in children's development has been a neglected area.

Resident fathers in England – not necessarily the UK - are less likely than mothers to read with their children. Unfortunately, research confirms that some men still regard reading as 'women's work'[xi]. However, it is encouraging that at least 50% of resident fathers in the UK do read at home with their children, often frequently. A US study (Ortiz, 2001[xii]) found fathers using 'environmental print' and recreational materials with their young children such as road signs, maps, magazines, comic strips in newspapers, instructions for board games, religious materials, crossword puzzles and homework instructions.

Fathers in prison

Non-resident fathers may include fathers in prison, and a significant body of research has been conducted into the impact of family reading initiatives, where the father is currently in prison. One model used is the 'story taping' model, where prisoners record and send stories to their children. The library service in Leicestershire in the UK worked with a local prison on the FATHERS project (Fathers As Teachers, Helping, Encouraging, Reading, Supporting). This project had a significant impact on inmates and their families and attracted interest from other prisons. A second UK prison in Dartmoor has run a successful 'Storybook Dads'[xiii] scheme, using an approach that is being taken up by other prisons across the country. It builds on the established format of prisoners recording stories on to tape by allowing them to digitally edit their stories, removing any mistakes and adding music and effects as appropriate. The aim is to produce a finished product that enhances the stories, whatever the reader's skills. Qualitative research shows the strong impact on both prisoners and their families. The following comment was made by the wife of a prisoner involved in a family reading scheme:

> *'The children were so pleased to hear from their Dad. They want their Dad to record them another story if that's possible. I think it's brilliant that he's allowed to do something like that for his children.'*[xiv]

INTERGENERATIONAL READING

Perhaps one of the more interesting examples of intergenerational reading and learning is that which takes place between the young and the elderly. One example is

the 'Care for indigenous children' workshops in Canada, where older people shared cultural values and explain cultural and social identity to younger people. A second example involved young German children in Hamburg talking to former Jewish residents who left the city during the Nazi period of the Second World War. A venue was provided for both groups to meet and talk, and the researchers found that the educational and spiritual value to both parties could not be over-emphasized. UNESCO recommends, 'Historical healing through intergenerational learning in Germany can be replicated in other parts of the world.'[xv]

FAMILIES SHARING READING FOR PLEASURE

A number of research studies in recent years have investigated the simple yet powerful act of families sharing reading for pleasure.[xvi] In the publishing world, the growing popularity of the 'crossover fiction' genre – in other words, books which are targeted both at adults and young people alike – has provided endless material for this activity. One example is the 'Liverpool Reads'[xvii] project, an annual city-wide initiative which involves the public library service, schools, universities and university libraries, bookshops, public buildings, prisons, hospitals and homes across the city. In each of these venues, people are reading and discussing the same book. Public events for families to share, such as writing and reading competitions and 'meet the author' events have been organized, and the enthusiasm is widespread. Research into the effect of initiatives such as this is being commissioned by the UK government Department for Education and Skills, which with a number of partners including public library representatives, is currently planning the Family Reading Campaign, to be launched in autumn 2006.

BARRIERS TO FAMILY READING

To conclude, it would seem appropriate firstly to summarise the main barriers to family reading, and secondly to suggest a model of effective family reading. Points made are based on my brief survey of international research, and on suggestions from the UK Family Reading Campaign.

- **Lack of early language and reading experiences**: where young people are not encouraged to talk and take part in extended conversations with those they spend their time with, their understanding of the spoken and written word is poorer than that of their peers.
- **Intergenerational barriers**: where parents have not enjoyed reading, or were not read to themselves, they do not necessarily see its importance. Reading is consequently seen as a chore.
- **Poor basic skills**: where parents' own basic skills are low, they are less confident and able to support their own children's reading.
- **Economic and financial barriers**: in periods of poverty due to debt, poor housing, health problems or unemployment, reading becomes a luxury rather than a necessity.
- **Cultural barriers**: for reasons of language, tradition or economic circumstance, some communities do not see the reading habit as part of their culture.

- **Institutional barriers**: people's needs may not be recognized by the infrastructure that should support them, because some institutions – schools, libraries - fail to engage effectively with them.

A SUGGESTED MODEL OF EFFECTIVE FAMILY READING

In order to break down these barriers, a model of effective family reading, in any country, could include the following elements:

- Parents and caregivers finding time to read regularly with their children.
- Reading for pleasure being recognized, at school and in the home, and promoted by the library service, as an important part of the process of learning to read.
- Young people feeling comfortable about being seen to enjoy reading.
- Reading in the home being encouraged and supported by schools, the library service and the local community.

Finally, as the National Literacy Trust states, this model would be one in which:

> *'All families see reading as an important part of their daily lives and part of the culture of their home. Children, young people and adults enjoy reading for its own sake. They view reading as an essential source of information and pleasure…'*

Thank you.

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[x] Idem

[xi] Basic Skills Agency – Sharing Practice website www.basic-skills.co.uk/site/page.php?cms=4&p=277

[xii] Ortiz, R.W. (2001).Pivotal parents: Emergent themes and implications on father involvement in children's early literacy experiences. *Reading Improvement, 38*(2), 132-144.

[xiii] For more information see www.storybookdads.co.uk

[xiv] Idem

[xv] UNESCO (2001) *Reflecting on lifelong learning discourses and practices across the world.* Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education.

[xvi] McNicol, S. (2003) 'Reaching families'. *Public Library Journal*, 18(1), 15-16.

[xvii] For more information see www.liverpoolreads.com