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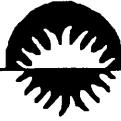
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# Identifying and Educating Low-Literate Adults

Susan Davis  
Sheila Diaz

Elementary school teachers are increasingly concerned about the apparent lack of interest parents exhibit in their children's schooling. Teachers are mystified when important school forms are not returned, when parents do not attend parent-teacher conferences, and when children enter school without having heard an adult read to them. Teachers often interpret these actions as a lack of parental interest in school. Actions that seem to indicate neglect, however, may really be masking an even deeper problem — parental illiteracy.

The United States government estimates that 20 percent of all Americans are illiterate. Elementary teachers have traditionally ignored this problem, believing that adult literacy is not one of their concerns. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many adults with low levels of literacy are the parents of the children in school. Although we know that schooling has an impact on young lives, children spend a maximum of nine percent of their time in the classroom (Kearns, 1993). The remaining time is spent under the supervision of parents or caretakers. The influence of illiterate parents, therefore, is substantial.

A common saying in adult literacy is that illiteracy is not hereditary, but it does run in families. One of the reasons for

the intergenerational effect of illiteracy is that homes without reading adults may send a mixed message to their children about the value of literacy. In their survey about the beliefs of parents about literacy learning, Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) found that low literate parents seemed to think of learning to read as a school-only activity. Additionally, low literate parents did not consider the importance of modeling reading at home. This research validates what literacy educators have long believed: when children do not see adults reading in their home culture, they may perceive reading as a school activity rather than an integral part of life. Children of illiterate parents, then, often do not value literacy themselves, and the cycle of illiteracy is perpetuated.

Elementary teachers who are aware of the possibility that the parents of their students may be illiterate may be able to smooth the way between their student and the home and also provide contacts for the illiterate adults. In order for classroom teachers to be effective, however, they must understand what it means to be literate, how to identify signs of illiteracy, and how to work with illiterate parents.

### **Defining literacy**

Literacy is not an easy term to define. Because of the complexity of the reading act, adults may successfully read difficult text for which they have a great deal of background knowledge, yet may not be able to understand letters and forms that are distributed from schools. Despite the variances in readers and texts, some states have defined literacy as being able to read at a specific grade level. According to the Illinois State Literacy Office, for example, adults must be reading at the ninth grade level to be considered literate. This definition of literacy was developed in response to research in workplace literacy which estimates that most workers read text for at least two hours per day and that text in the workplace is

usually written at a ninth to twelfth grade reading level (Diehl and Mikulecky, 1980). To be able to function well in our information society, therefore, adults need to be reading at a fairly sophisticated level.

Though many parents are able to read text that falls below the ninth grade reading level, these parents are considered functionally illiterate, or low literate. While these parents may be able to read, their limited reading skill prevents them from being able to read communications from school.

### **Signs of low literacy**

There are several warning signs of low literacy in parents about which teachers should be aware. The signs that follow may indicate that a parent cannot read. Parents who exhibit many of these signs may be able to read but may choose not to read, so teachers should not automatically assume that these parents are illiterate. Instead, teachers should consider these signs as indicative of the *possibility* of a low level of literacy.

**School forms are frequently not returned or are incorrectly filled out.** Parents who rarely send back forms that are mailed home may not be able to read the forms. Although many illiterate parents have someone whom they can ask to read important notices, they may not have every communication sent by the school read to them. If they are marginal readers, they may try to fill out a school form, but may fill in incorrect information in the blanks. If they are asked to fill out a form at school, they may make excuses (e.g., "I forgot my glasses"), or they may ask to take the form home.

**Parents do not respond to written communication from the teacher.** Teachers know that one way to get a response

from parents is to write a note home. Teachers without access to typewriters or computers sometimes write handwritten cursive notes. If the notes are consistently unanswered, this may be a sign that the parents are having difficulty reading them. This sign does not automatically assume illiteracy, however. Some parents who are able to read typed text may not be able to read American cursive handwriting. European cursive, for example, is formed differently from American cursive. It may be very difficult for language minority parents who can read typewritten text to read American cursive writing.

Some school personnel have tried to help language minority parents by translating text into their native language. Although many parents may be able to read text in their native languages, teachers should realize that not all language minority parents are literate in their primary language.

**Notes to the school are poorly written or appear to be copied.** Most schools require a written note when students are absent. Notes from a parent saying the same thing each time, that seem to be laboriously copied, or that have an unusual number of errors could be a signal that the parent is not literate.

**Parents report that they do not have time to read to their children.** Parents who have an unusual number of excuses for not reading with their child may feel intimidated by reading situations. Of course, many parents are legitimately busy at certain times. For example, if a family member is in the hospital, the family may place reading with the children low on their priority list. Parents who understand the importance of reading to their children and still cannot find the time may not feel confident reading aloud.

**Parents frequently misunderstand report cards or school calendars.** Teachers may not realize that school communications, especially report cards, are very difficult for low literate parents to understand. When teachers discuss report cards with parents and find that the parents have not read or understood the information, they should consider the possibility that the parents cannot read. Similarly, if parents frequently forget early released days or days off school, they may have trouble reading the school calendar.

**Children seem unable to get help with their homework.** Parents of children in upper grades may have difficulty helping their children with homework, but if a young child consistently says that parents were not able to help, that might be a sign that the parents cannot read.

**Parents appear overly hostile or emotional at conferences.** Parents who cannot read may feel threatened by any school situation, especially one in which their ability to read may be called into question. Parents who act hostile at conferences may have other problems that are causing anger, but it also could be an indication that the parents have trouble with literacy tasks.

**Parents initiate no contact with the school of any kind, even when necessary.** Parents who do not make contact with the school, even to return phone calls, may be fearful of school and school personnel. Their fears may be for a variety of reasons, one of which may be that they feel defensive about their own ability to read.

**At family activities, parents seem to take the role of a child.** Some parents, especially young parents, may have more fun at family reading nights at school than do their children. These parents may not have ever had the

opportunity to read and write simple text before. Parents who become overly involved in simple reading tasks may be at a similar learning level as their children.

**Children comment that their parents cannot read very well.** Children are often matter of fact about their families. If a parent cannot read, children may tell their teacher that their mom or dad was unable to read to them because they cannot read.

### **How teachers can help low literate parents**

Parents who cannot read may be extremely embarrassed or defensive about their lack of reading ability — especially to their child's teacher. Although it is in the best interest of the student for the parents to improve their literacy, teachers need to be cautious about directly confronting the problem. Instead, they can learn to communicate more effectively with parents about school-related information and may find opportunities to suggest literacy help for the parents.

**Become sensitive to the reading needs of the parents of your students.** If parents exhibit many of the signs listed above, consider the possibility that they might have a low degree of literacy.

**Investigate the possibility of implementing a family reading program.** Low literate parents can learn to read with their young children by programs that teach parents *how* to read to their children. For information about family literacy programs contact The National Center for Family Literacy, One Riverfront Plaza, Suite 608, Louisville KY 40202.

**Write all parent communication in simple terms.** Low literate parents may not be able to read or understand educational jargon. One example of this was when a parent

checked the blank that said *transportation requested* even though she had her own transportation. To help parents understand school communication, consider replacing difficult terms with more familiar words.

***Terms that may be difficult***

***Possible replacement***

Child care provided

Do you need a babysitter?

Transportation requested

Do you need a ride?

2:00 dismissal

Students go home at 2:00

Spring recess

No school

Assessment week

Testing this week

Registration

Sign up for

Vision screening

Eye test

Remediation needed in

Needs extra help in

Occupation

Job

**Use alternative methods of communicating with parents.** If you know that some of your parents cannot read, make routine school communication easy for them. Although each situation is different, you might try one of these ideas:

- In many families, at least one family member can read. It may be an older child or an extended family member. Try to find out who reads important messages to the family and make that person aware of any notes that need signatures from the parents.

- Instead of sending home a field trip note, call the parents and tell them that the child has a field trip coming up. Then ask them to come to the school to sign the form. When they arrive, tell them what the form says and show them where to sign.

**Consider discussing literacy tutoring with low literate parents.** If you have a good relationship with the parents, you can make them aware of free literacy programs in your area. A resource for finding local literacy centers is Literacy Volunteers of America, 5795 Widewaters Parkway, Syracuse NY 13214. Provide the parent with the name of the local agency, and refer them to that agency.

**Work with literacy agencies to become an advocate for low literate adults.** Only by educators, literacy providers, parents, and children working as a team can we begin to make the United States a place where parents and children alike can read.

## Conclusion

Elementary teachers need to become aware of the complexity of adult lives, including the possibility that the parents of their students cannot read very well. By becoming informed about ways to identify low literate parents, teachers can begin to learn alternate ways to communicate with parents about their children. In their communications, teachers may even be able to encourage the low literate parents to improve their own reading, thus making a break in the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy.

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