

# *Reading Horizons*

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*Volume 41, Issue 2*

2000

*Article 2*

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2000

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## The Role of Storytelling in Effective Family Literacy Programs

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# The Role of Storytelling in Effective Family Literacy Programs

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## **Abstract**

The family literacy movement, which emphasizes respect for diversity and the cultural heritage of participants, is gaining momentum. Acknowledging the importance of family-as-educator, researchers have searched for effective strategies to develop children's oral language and literacy more authentically. The art of storytelling provides an excellent vehicle for promoting and enhancing language and literacy development within families. A sampling of effective family literacy programs across the United States revealed that each included storytelling as a vital component.



# **The Role of Storytelling in Effective Family Literacy Programs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The family literacy movement, which emphasizes respect for diversity and the cultural heritage of participants, is gaining momentum. Acknowledging the importance of family-as-educator, researchers have searched for effective strategies to develop children's oral language and literacy more authentically. The art of storytelling provides an excellent vehicle for promoting and enhancing language and literacy development within families. A sampling of effective family literacy programs across the United States revealed that each included storytelling as a vital component.

The concept of family-as-educator has its origin in anthropological and sociological findings. The related research includes studies of the role of the family in developing children's literacy and oral language (Morrow, 1995; Morrow, 1997; Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995). Morrow (1995) recognized that the term family literacy does not have a clear, concise definition due to the complexity of the topic. The Family Literacy Commission of the International Reading Association offered the following definition:

Family literacy encompasses the ways parents, children, and their extended family members use literacy at home and in their community. Sometimes, family literacy occurs naturally during the routines of daily living and helps adults and children "get things done." These events might include using drawings or writings to share ideas; composing notes or letters to communicate messages; making lists; reading and following directions; or sharing stories and ideas through conversation, reading, and writing. Family literacy may be initiated purposefully by a parent or may occur spontaneously as parents and children go about the business of their daily lives. Family literacy activities may also reflect the ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage of the families involved (Morrow, 1995, p. 7-8).

Continuing, Morrow (1995) emphasized that "the efforts of a variety of organizations and their potential for collaboration represent an invaluable strength in the continued study of family literacy. Only by examining many viewpoints in a field so complex and broad will we come to understand it fully" (p.8). Francis Kazemek, (1995), in an essay on his own family's literacy, advocated the importance of the affective domain. According to Kazemek, literacy "involves things like connection, sharing, individual interest and need, mutual purpose and vision and, yes, love.... Our efforts as educators will be more potentially useful if we begin to look seriously at the relationships among literacy, family, passion and love instead of the relationship between literacy and some abstract scheme of categorization" (p. 603).

Family literacy programs take advantage of the recursive nature of family relationships. Attitudes and behaviors of one member shape the attitudes and behaviors of other members, resulting in a sense of partnership or shared mission within families. The family literacy movement recognizes that children influence parents just as much as parents influence children. According to the Barbara Bush Foundation (1989), family literacy makes use of these influences to help each family member successfully achieve literacy.

While the concept is not new, legislative support for family literacy did not gain momentum until the latter part of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, federal legislation gave rise to the movement of what we know today as family literacy. The Adult Education Act, the Elementary Education Act and Secondary Education Act, and the Family Support Act of 1988 all had components of family/school partnerships. The Even Start program, signed into law in 1988, was the first federally-funded program that offered parenting education along with early

childhood education as a component of the program; it catalyzed much of the nationwide attention to family literacy (Schwartz, 1999).

Reporting on an investigation of existing programs, Morrow (1995) suggested that one must become aware of two opposing philosophies that exist in today's literacy programs. In the deficit or transmission model, information is transmitted in one direction from the school to the parents and then taught to the child (Schwartz, 1999). This model was investigated in family literacy programs that taught immigrant children and refugee parents to do traditional, school-type activities in the home (Auerbach, 1989; Morrow, 1995). Auerbach felt that the transmission model made many false assumptions, which in turn lead to a deficit model belief system. In contrast, the wealth model is more positive, emphasizing that all families have strengths, abilities, and literacy patterns within the home. The researchers favoring this model felt that in planning for family literacy programs, one must build upon existing family patterns and the needs of school and community (Auerbach, 1989); this model emphasized the partnership nature of the learning process.

### Effective Family Literacy Programs

Building on the premise that the art of storytelling, with its many educational benefits, provides an excellent vehicle for promoting and enhancing language and literacy development within families, the authors of this article investigated a sample of effective family literacy programs across the United States to examine the use of storytelling. Consistently, the most successful programs included storytelling as a vital component. Reporting on five examples of successful programs, each used storytelling as a vehicle for participants to construct and use language within a meaningful context.

The Club Familiar de Narracion de Cuentos (Family Storytelling Club) was sponsored by Reading is Fundamental (RIF) and the Spanish Education Development Center in Washington, DC, in 1971, with the goal to increase the skills and self-esteem of Hispanic families by encouraging them to read for pleasure. The program offered workshops to parents, enabling them to use the bilingual library as a source for the stories. Parents also learned how to effectively use flannel boards and puppets during storytelling, which promoted the development of the language processes. With an emphasis on multicultural education, the importance of reading aloud to children was also covered as a workshop topic. According to the program coordinators, parent participation in the

program has increased and interest in Club Familiar has expanded nationally.

The Navajo Parent/Child Reading Program began in 1985 on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. Stories were read to preschoolers at the Chinle Primary School in both English and Navajo, and the children were encouraged to take the books home and share them with their parents, via retellings. Parents were encouraged to tell stories to their children, incorporating intergenerational oral traditions and customs. As a result of the Navajo Parent/Child Reading Program, children expressed pleasure in everyday reading and the sharing of stories with their parents, and parents became more active participants in the school.

In 1988, Reading is Fundamental (RIF) joined a bilingual radio station owned by the California Human Development Corporation, KHDC-FM, in Salinas Valley, California, to form the Literacy Broadcast Project. The project's primary goals, aimed at the migrant Hispanic population, were to foster the desire to read, to improve reading skills, and to boost the self-esteem of Spanish-speaking families with low literacy levels. Radio broadcasts involving over 800 children featured storytelling, reading aloud, local history, and cultural experiences. During the 1989-1990 school year, the California State Department of Education continued the development of this project. RIF continues to serve the nation's neediest children through programs that provide books and other essential literacy materials (Reading is Fundamental, 2000).

The Parent Power Works Program in the Palm Beach County, Florida School District, grew out of the awareness that children need support from home in order to improve their literacy skills. Since 1993, this model program has provided adult education classes, time for parents and children to learn together, parent education, and opportunities for parents to volunteer at their children's schools. Currently, Parent Power operates in two schools; participants in one school are primarily African American and have low socioeconomic status, while all participants from the other school are Hispanic. The storytelling component of this program has been successfully incorporated into community field trips. In addition, participants who are particularly skilled in storytelling have been encouraged to visit different classrooms. Because of its ongoing success, the Florida Department of Education continues to support this program.

Since 1994, the Tellin' Stories Project has served as a bridge between parents, schools, and communities in the District of Columbia

area. This project enables parents to work with other parents from different backgrounds, thus creating a school environment that values all cultures and family traditions; in this model, parents naturally become part of the decision-making process in their children's schools. The project's activities include parent and teacher cross-cultural storytelling breakfasts, writing workshops, and resources for parents and students to do their own oral history projects. Through these storytelling activities, parents document the past, create visions of the future, and create literature for their children and communities (Network of Educators on the Americas, 2000).

### The Storytelling Exchange

Storytelling has been accepted as an educational tool throughout the ages. According to Hamilton and Weiss (1991), "Storytelling is the oldest form of education. Cultures throughout the world have always told tales as a way of passing down their beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations" (p. 1). Storytelling, which involves the use of oral language, is "older than history ... not bounded by one civilization, one continent or one race" (Baker & Greene, 1977, p.1). Long before history was recorded, storytelling was the medium for transmitting human history (Roney, 1989). Today, storytelling can be used to continue these traditional purposes as well as to promote language and literacy development within families.

The goal of the storytelling process is to create an exchange (Cliatt & Shaw, 1988, p. 294). This exchange makes use of storytelling to promote and enhance literacy development as the cycle is repeated. To begin the exchange, adults or children tell stories. Telling stories or reading aloud to children provides a sense of story, thus establishing through modeling the idea that the purpose of language is to construct meaning. As they experience the many ways language is constructed, students take pleasure in language and learning.

Through listening to stories, children become more purposeful, attentive and active listeners. According to Hennings (2000), active listening helps to develop critical thinking and awareness of the communication process. Listening to stories broadens experiences, reinforces imagination, and enables children to better understand feelings of others. Furthermore, Peck (1989) advocated that "by listening to a variety of tellers, students learn to discriminate and evaluate storytelling styles, story genres, and the strengths and weaknesses of both" (p. 139).

The storytelling exchange is a reciprocal process that gives children a chance to tell their own stories. Children have the opportunity to develop their oral language and to practice speaking to nonthreatening groups of other students, enhancing their self-esteem (Hennings, 2000). The active participation of storytelling also allows students to express themselves creatively and dramatically. As an extension of telling stories, children begin to write their own stories. Just as in telling their own stories, they are developing their reasoning and thinking abilities as they construct and record meaning. As they move through the overlapping and recursive stages of the writing process, both reading and writing are developed and practiced. The reading-writing connection is reinforced again as children read their own stories. Children experience the joy of sharing their own creation with other children and adults, and are motivated to maintain the story time exchange.

### Storytelling: An Educational Tool for Families

This description of the storytelling exchange shows that the art of storytelling can promote language and literacy development with learners of all ages. Storytelling promotes both receptive and expressive language development. Furthermore, it is an excellent vehicle for integrating the language processes in today's learning environment and strengthening communication within families.

Listening to stories is beneficial in many ways (Hamilton and Weiss, 1991). It provides a chance to learn concepts and skills, such as story structure, vocabulary and comprehension, in the context of an authentic activity. Fisher and Terry (1990) pointed out the purposeful relationship between meaningful context and vocabulary development: "Through encountering words in a meaningful context and having a chance to use them and to make them their own, students add new words and word meanings to their vocabulary" (p. 265). In addition to cognitive development, the affective domain is also enhanced by storytelling, which focuses on the recursive relationship between children and parents and/or other adults.

Mastering story structure through listening to stories seems to aid the comprehension process. The children from the Navajo Parent/Child Reading Program, who had heard many stories, began to enjoy reading and telling stories because they had the ability to understand and manipulate story structure for their own enjoyment. Students who understand story structure and connections between the various parts of stories have a better chance of comprehending the written word and

understanding the expressed meaning of the writer. As students become familiar with story language and the elements of story structure, the stories they read themselves will become clearer and more enjoyable (Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 2000). Research has shown that children learn story grammar best through repeated exposure to stories (Reutzell & Cooter, 2000). Storytelling is one way to introduce students to the parts of a story that can be found in all literature--setting, character, plot, etc. This knowledge of story structure can then be applied to enhance their own creations as storytellers and story writers.

Perhaps one of the most important benefits of hearing stories is the development of imagination and enhanced background knowledge. Stories take the listener to other times and places. As Fisher and Terry (1990) observed,

In hearing stories, children can visit the past and the future. Their knowledge of the world is expanded. They can read about experiences of others that they will never have and understand more fully what other people's lives are like (p. 266).

Palmer, Hafner and Sharp (1994) also pointed out that storytelling can be used "for developing language and cultural literacy" (p. 56); for example, "it can be used to introduce students to the traditions, beliefs, and history of folktales" (p. 56). One goal of the Tellin' Stories project is to help students understand a variety of cultures and family traditions, as well as to understand their own family heritages more fully. Because storytelling is the medium for these lessons, students do not feel like they are listening to a history lecture; instead, they are absorbing knowledge naturally.

The logical extension of hearing stories is telling one's own stories. "The storytelling process provides a meaningful purpose for oral expression" (Peck, 1989, p. 140). Storytelling provides models for demonstrating how ordinary events can become special and exciting through creative use of language (Hennings, 2000). The radio broadcasts of the Literacy Broadcast Project provided a purpose for telling stories and made the act of telling stories more meaningful and exciting by providing an audience for the stories.

Storytelling allows the imagination to be set free and even the "tall tale" to be acceptable; with storytelling students can construct language without worry about truth or accuracy (Hamilton & Weiss, 1991). This focus on storytelling, rather than accuracy, allows students to develop their oral expression skills (Peck, 1989). According to Fisher and Terry

(1990), "Storytelling is one of the few kinds of talk in the classroom that offers rich, complex, vivid language, which develops students' language in complexity and in vocabulary" (p. 264). Hearing stories, students learn the importance of choosing the correct spoken word; as Mark Twain said, "The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

A natural progression from hearing, reading, and telling stories is the writing of original stories (Livo & Rietz, 1986). Many effective programs incorporate both storytelling and story writing. The Tellin' Stories project's collaborative parent/child writing workshop is one example. Roney (1989) observed, "Following a storytelling session, the children's desire to write is often as strong as their desire to read" (p. 520). Fisher and Terry (1990) offered the following to support the role of storytelling in helping students to learn the forms and conventions of writing:

Hearing the language of stories and poetry and other well-written material gives children a sense of the sound of written language and the convention used in writing... There are certain phrasings, structures, conventions that are part of the written register of language that can be learned partly through listening to written material read aloud (pp. 265-266).

Children often use literacy patterns from stories in their own writing; for example, young children often begin their stories, "Once upon a time..." or "Long ago in a faraway land...." Storytelling, then, becomes an exceptional teaching tool as the carefully constructed language of story exposes students to grammatical forms they will model and one day make their own.

The cultural literacy acquired by hearing stories benefits writing development. Knowledge of the world is expanded as children hear stories of other times and places and learn about the lives of others. Roney (1989) noted, "The benefit to novice writers, in addition to building their store of things to write about, is that storytelling can so enliven the curriculum that children become excited enough to want to write about it" (p. 522). Parent Power Works has documented an increase in literacy activities in the homes of participants, showing the enthusiasm and interest participants have in reading and writing. Storytelling, which exposes students to varied and new ideas, serves as a useful vehicle for conceptualization in order to construct meaning in writing.

Perhaps the greatest strength of storytelling as an educational tool is that it provides a bridge between community and school. Storytelling allows children to draw on resources from their homes and communities, including family and extended family members. One goal of family literacy is to use methods that are complementary to the culture of the community and that teach children the ways in which language is used within the community (Bloome, Katz, Solsken, Willet, & Wilson-Keenan, 2000). Storytelling accomplishes this within a low-risk environment. Family settings allow children to discover language with little anxiety or criticism (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000). Furthermore, storytelling encourages respect for cultural and linguistic differences.

All of the family literacy programs described in this article attempt to integrate learning into family life in a way that affirms the value of the family's knowledge and culture. The Club Familiar de Narracion de Cuentos taught parents to use flannel boards and puppets, giving them a new way to communicate with their children. The Navajo Parent/Child Reading Program built on oral tradition and encouraged interaction in English and Navajo. The Literacy Broadcast Project gave children the chance to share their culture with a wide audience. Parent Power Works has found that contact and positive communication between teachers and parents have increased as a result of the program. Tellin' Stories helps form positive connections between schools and families by bringing various cultures and experiences into the classroom.

As described in the foregoing family literacy programs, there are well-documented benefits of using storytelling as a vehicle for promoting family literacy and affirming diversity. Storytelling brings families together for active interaction, allowing them to share customs and traditions. It provides an enjoyable opportunity for connecting with others and learning about intergenerational history and tradition. The use of storytelling in family literacy programs also provides educational benefits, which include language development, increased listening and reading comprehension, and the promotion of reading, writing and speaking skills and cultural literacy development. The art of storytelling can enrich the family literacy movement, which is currently gaining momentum in the field of education. Storytelling is a timeless educational tool, which has made its way from the earliest cave drawings to the technological integration of modern times.

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