Goodling Institute
for Research in Family Literacy

Working with Preliterate and Beginning Literacy Level Parents in Family Literacy and Parent Involvement Programs

Colleen Shaughnessy and Esther Prins

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide recommendations for educators working with preliterate and beginning literacy level parents[1] in family literacy and parent involvement programs. This guide is motivated by the growing presence of immigrant learners in schools and family literacy programs. Over 20% of public school children have immigrant parents, and 15% of these parents have less than a ninth grade education (Urban Institute, 2006), a group that no doubt includes adults who are preliterate or beginning literates in their native language.

Numerous studies indicate the importance of developing a foundation of literacy practices at young ages. Immigrant children are less likely than U.S.-born children to be placed in daycare and more likely to be cared for by family members (Urban Institute, 2006). Thus, preliterate and beginning literacy parents and grandparents are likely to be caregivers for young children, and a primary influence on their language and literacy development. After summarizing research on teaching preliterate adults, this brief describes considerations for tailoring family literacy and parent involvement to the needs of preliterate caregivers. According to Vang (2005),

[1] For the purpose of brevity, we use the term "preliterate" in the remainder of this document.

parents who are preliterate, who struggle to speak and read English, and who have little or no formal schooling may have difficulty assisting with written homework, communicating with teachers in English, or participating in other aspects of the school system. As such, many children of preliterate parents navigate the entirety of their education on their own (Vang, 2005). In light of these challenges, family literacy and parent involvement programs can adjust their expectations and instructional strategies to help parents understand and negotiate the U.S. education system while developing the English language and literacy skills of both parents and the children.

Some scholars (e.g., Duffy, 2007) consider the term *preliterate* to be controversial because it does not acknowledge forms of literacy beyond reading and writing texts. However, it is a useful term to designate adult learners who speak a first language whose written form is rare or does not exist (Savage, 1993), such as Haitian Creole or Somali Bantu Mai Mai. Preliterate adult learners have little or no experience with formal learning or classroom expectations. Thus, educators must be vigilant about the assumptions they make when conveying information and expectations to preliterate parents (Gunn, 2003). They should also consider the effects of culture and traumatic experiences on preliterate adults and their families' learning.

PENNSTATE
1855

COLLEGE of EDUCATION

Developing Cultural Awareness

Commonly, preliterate populations are viewed from a deficit model that focuses on what they lack but ignores their skills and abilities. Volk and Long (2005) explored commonly held deficit-based myths about culture and literacy by examining the rich cultural practices of kindergarten Latino children and their parents. Roy and Roxas (2011) investigated educators' perceptions of preliterate Somali Bantu parents' educational goals versus their actual goals. Educators did not recognize parents' goal and commitment to maintaining their histories through storytelling as a legitimate educational goal or equate it with valuing education. Further, Valenzuela (2002) documented the phenomenon of "subtractive schooling" among Mexican and other Latino high school students in a majority-Mexican, urban area of the U.S. Subtractive schooling involves the devaluing and removal of one's culture to adopt the dominant culture. Valenzuela explored the multi-generational effects of subtractive schooling, concluding that there is a progressively detrimental impact of subtractive schooling the longer one's family remains in the U.S.

These and other authors (e.g., Conroy, 2006) advocate for cultural understanding of adult students' home cultures. Educators and programs can use strategies such as talking with cultural informants, researching students' home countries, understanding their spiritual beliefs, and visiting their homes. In so doing, educators can gain a better understanding of adult learners' culturally-bound knowledge and then incorporate it into educational activities and teaching techniques (Rai, 2001). For example, many preliterate cultures have strong oral and storytelling traditions. Students from these cultural backgrounds may have more success in the oral aspects of language learning.

Volk and Long (2005) also recommend several ways that early childhood teachers can engage with children's home literacy practices such as using literature and songs from the home culture, validating the home language, and creating activities and events during which parents and siblings can contribute to the child's learning. When oral traditions are seen as a strength, family literacy and parent involvement programs can use them to build literacy skills. Furthermore, educators may garner insights into parents' educational goals for themselves and their children.

> Educators and programs can use strategies such as talking with cultural informants, researching students' home countries, understanding their spiritual beliefs, and visiting their homes.

Recognizing Trauma

By learning about the culture and history of preliterate adult students' home countries, educators also can cultivate a greater awareness of students' past experiences. Many preliterate students are refugees with storied, painful pasts borne from civil war, armed conflict, violence, sexual assault, torture, displacement, loss of family members, and more. These traumatic experiences inevitably shape their learning. For instance, the Laotian refugee women in one study commonly suffered from headaches, poor concentration, and memory loss (Gordon, 2011). Shaughnessy (2006) observed similar effects on learning among Somali Bantu refugee women. The Salvadoran women in Purcell-Gates and Waterman's (2000) study related that while they lived in the Honduran refugee camps in the 1980s, the emotional and physical toll—"sudden, intense experiences of emotional sensitivity, sadness, or anxiety…[and] headaches, backaches, ulcers, and stomachaches" (pp. 35-36)—of the civil war hindered their participation in the refugee camp literacy classes. One woman began attending classes, but lost her "will to do anything" after learning that two of her sons had been killed (several years apart). She explained, "That is how I could not study in Honduras—on account of the bad news and sorrow. It is like stabbing into your heart!" (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 25).

Educators can teach more effectively when they understand the learning challenges faced by survivors of trauma. Thus, educators of preliterate adults should learn about their students' pasts and, where trauma is evident, respond with sensitivity and provide support services such as referrals to mental health professionals (Horsman, 2000, 2006).

Recommendations for Instruction

This section offers recommendations for family literacy and parent involvement programs that serve preliterate and non-formally educated adults.

<u>**Language and Literacy Instruction**</u>

The following suggestions show how language and literacy instruction can incorporate preliterate adult learners' prior life experiences and their skills and knowledge. Taylor (1993), Holt (1995), and Shaughnessy (2006) recommend the use of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to bridge oral stories and the written form of those stories in adult English as a second language (ESL) literacy classes. LEA is a technique commonly used with children and with adult basic education, ESL, and literacy programs in which a student tells a story in their words while the teacher writes the verbatim story on the board, saying each word as it is written. The text of the story is then used to develop an awareness of the relationship between what is said and what is written (sound/symbol relationship) and to ask questions about the story. Grammar and other mistakes do not need to be corrected if the objective is to generate language and meaning. The LEA is one way in which educators can be exposed to the culturally-bound literacy practices of their students and innovatively adapt these practices to the classroom.

Pfahl and Wiessener (2007) encourage family literacy educators to make original story books with preliterate adult learners. The relevance to learners' lives will be more direct than a book published for mass consumption. Since preliterate learners tend to be more literal than abstract in their thinking,

Shaughnessy (2006) recommends sequencing material from the concrete to the abstract. For instance, teachers can bring items (e.g., vegetables) to class and then demonstrate the connection to a two-dimensional representation such as photographs or drawings.

Purcell-Gates (2002) further encourages the use of realia (real-life objects), authentic materials, and learners' authentic purposes when teaching preliterate adults. Concrete items help reinforce vocabulary words and bridge between the oral (concrete) and the written (abstract). Additionally, realia involves more senses such as touch and smell. Authentic literacy instruction "involves students in reading and writing real-life texts for real-life purposes" (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004, p. 1), and "authentic texts are those that are read and written by people in their lives to accomplish communicative purposes. Authentic purposes for reading and writing are those that function communicatively for people beyond *learning to read and write*" (p. 140). Within family literacy settings, authentic materials include anything that is typically used within adult learners' daily lives, such as electric bills and bus schedules. These and other activities such as "reading children's books are authentic if adults encounter and use these texts for real purposes outside the classroom," not just as a literacy exercise (Prins & Van Horn, 2012, p. 176; see also Purcell-Gates et al., 2004).

<u>**Unveiling U.S. Schooling**</u>

O'Reilly (1998) recommends providing explicit explanations of schooling in the U.S. For example, adult preliterate students need to know that school professionals expect them to engage with administrators and teachers through activities such as attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, helping with homework, and the like. The culture of U.S. education may also need to be explained, at times in comparison with that of the home culture. In these discussions, educators should help learners identify and reflect on the advantages and disad-

vantages of different educational systems. Family literacy educators can incorporate routines and structures that mirror those of the U.S. schools their children attend. This will demonstrate to the parents how the schools operate and increase their understanding of the expectations placed on their children and the parental role in literacy development.

Adjusting Expectations and Instructional Strategies

Progress is much slower with preliterate adults than with other groups of learners (Robson, 1982; Shaughnessy, 2006; Strucker, 2002). Therefore, celebrating small achievements, such as tracing a letter or recognizing a number, is encouraged. Along with the slower progress, retention of new information requires a great deal of repetition. For instance, Shaughnessy (2006) taught preliterate adults the days of the week for fifteen minutes three times per week for more than six months before the students could retain these new vocabulary words. Varied ways of teaching the information were used, but because time and date are valued differently in Somali Bantu culture—identifying the day of the week was a new concept—progress was slow, and repetition imperative. Computer programs can provide alternate means of repetition for adult learners while also helping them develop reading and computer skills through an interactive medium (Family Literacy, 2005).

As fully literate adults, educators may forget myriad things that are new to preliterate adults: identifying the correct orientation of text on paper (top, bottom, left, right), writing on a line not through it, holding a pencil, and other aspects of literacy that we take for granted.

Effective instruction therefore requires empathy for learners and awareness of the myriad concepts and skills they are trying to learn and adapt for their own purposes.

Conclusion

Preliterate learners challenge educators to address the difficulties of pursuing formal education for the first time at an older age. Research underscores the importance of valuing the knowledge and skills that adult preliterate learners bring to family literacy and parent involvement programs while teaching them about the expectations and procedures of formal learning environments such as K-12 schools. Qualities such as understanding, empathy, patience, and curiosity about the past and present experiences of preliterate adult learners are essential to effective teaching. As the number of immigrant children grows, educators should make a concerted effort to be aware of preliterate populations and to tailor instruction and programmatic offerings to their specific needs.

References

Adler, S. M. (2004). Home-school relations and the construction of racial and ethnic identity of Hmong elementary students. *The School Community Journal, 14*(2): 57-75.

Conroy, P. W. (2006). Hmong Culture and Visual Impairment: Strategies for Culturally Sensitive Practices. *RE:view: Rehabilitation Education for Blindness and Visual Impairment*. *38*(2): 55-64.

Ellis, B. H., MacDonald, H. Z., Lincoln, A. K., & Cabral, H. J. (2008). Mental health of Somali adolescent refugees: The role of trauma, stress, and perceived discrimination. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 76*(2): 184 – 193.

Family literacy project earns IRA technology award. (2007). *Reading Today, 25*(1), 45-45.

Gordon, D. M. (2011). Trauma and second language learning among Laotian refugees. *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement*, *6*: 1-17.

Gunn. M. (2003). Opportunity for literacy? Preliterate learners in the AMEP. *Prospect*, *18* (2): 37-53.

Horsman, J. (2000). *Too scared to learn: Women, violence, and education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Horsman, J. (2006). Moving beyond "stupid": Taking account of the impact of violence on women's learning. *International Journal of Educational Development, 26*(2), 177-188.

O'Reilly, T. (1998). *An investigation of Hmong students' academic success*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

Pfahl, N. L., & Wiessner, C. A. (2007). Creating new directions with story: Narrating life experience as story in community adult education contexts. *Adult Learning, 18*(3/4): 9-13.

Prins, E., & Van Horn, B. (2012). Adult learning in family literacy: Special considerations for women learners. In B. H. Wasik & B. Van Horn (Eds.), *Handbook of family literacy* (2nd ed., pp. 166-180). New York: Routledge.

Purcell-Gates, V., Deneger, S. C., Jacobson, E., & Soler, M. (2002) Impact of authentic adult literacy instruction on adult literacy practices. *Reading Research Quarterly, 37*(1): 70-92.

Purcell-Gates, V., Jacobson, E., & Degener, S. C. (2004). *Print literacy development: Uniting cognitive and social practice theories*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Purcell-Gates, V., & Waterman, R. (2000). *Now we read, we see, we speak: Portrait of literacy development in an adult Freirean-based class*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rai, K. (2001). It begins with the people: Community development and indigenous wisdom. *Adult Learning, 12/13*(4/1): 14-17.

Roy. L. A., & Roxas, K. C. (2011). Whose deficit is this anyhow? Exploring counter-stories of Somali Bantu refugees' experiences. *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(3): 521-541.

Savage, K. L. (1993). Literacy through competency-based educational approaches in J. Crandall and J. K. Peyton (Eds.), *Approaches to adult ESL literacy instruction*. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Shaughnessy, C. (2006). *Preliterate English as a second language learners: A case study of Somali Bantu women. (ED495960).* Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD. Retrieved from: http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/28/06/63.pdf

Shaughnessy, C. (2008). *Working with preliterate and non-literate learners*. Denver, CO: Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning. Retrieved from: http://www.springinstitute.org/Files/springinstituteprel7663bf.pdf

Valenzuela, A. (2002). Reflections on the subtractive underpinnings of education research and policy. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*: 235-241

Vang, C. T. (2005). Hmong-American students still face multiple challenges in public schools. *Multicultural Education, 13*(1): 27-35.

Volk, D., & Long, S. (2005). Challenging myths of the deficit perspective: Honoring children's literacy resources. *Young Children, 60*(6): 12-19.

Additional Resources

CAELA Digest: **Working with Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners**
www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/litQA.html

CAELA Practitioner Toolkit: **Working with Adult English Language Learners**
www.cal.org/caela/tools/instructional/prac_toolkit.html

National Institute for Literacy: **Adult English Language Learners with Limited Literacy**
lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/ELLpaper2010.pdf

Adult Literacy Education (ALE) Wiki: **Methods and Materials to use with Pre-literate Parents**
wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Methods_and_materials_to_use_with_pre-literate_parents