

Making reading a shared pleasure and a valuable skill: the Family Literacy Project in the southern Drakensberg, KwaZulu-Natal

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Findings from a year's research into a family literacy programme in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa are presented in this article. Of particular interest is how the combination of adult and early literacy activities has encouraged reading in families. The evaluative process involved individual qualitative interviews, material review and observation of programme activities. Detailed findings are given of one of four case studies covered during the research.

The term family literacy was coined in the United States of America and most research has been conducted there and in the United Kingdom (Baker, Serpell and Sonnenschein 1995, Bird 2001, Edwards 1995, Gadsden 1994, Graves and Wendorf 1995, Hannon 2000, Harrison 1995, Hendrix 1999/2000, McKee and Rhett 1995, Morrow, Tracey and Maxwell 1995, Neuman 1995, Paratore 1995 and Philliber, Spillman and King 1996). Whatever the model, family literacy programmes usually combine adult and early literacy with the education of parents. This means that they often operate where adult literacy levels are of concern and target one or more in a family, usually the mother and child who is often a pre-schooler. The assumption is that parents are a child's first and most influential teachers. Parents join family literacy programmes for a variety of reasons, for example to improve job prospects, to conform to state benefit requirements and for the benefit to their families, in particular their children (for example, Yaffe and Williams 1998).

There are many studies that demonstrate that it is the parents' attitudes towards literacy that play a major role in the development of early literacy skills in young children, rather than the material environment in homes, neighbourhoods or schools (Nistler and Maiers 1999; Amstutz 2000). The latter draws attention to a 1997 study by Ebener, Lara-Alecio and Irby, in which parents encouraged their children to study, had high expectations of their success and equated education with achieving a better life (Amstutz 2000: 212). A report on the research of Spreadbury in Australia states that she found that "children benefit, not only from their exposure to reading, but from the interaction and talk which takes place with the parent" (Parents return to school to learn about literacy 1998: 5).

Overview of the Family Literacy Project, KwaZulu-Natal

The Family Literacy Project (FLP) operates in the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains, an area of spectacular beauty but great poverty and which lacks infrastructure. Roads are poor and there is neither electricity nor piped water to the homes of project members. There are few job opportunities apart from short-term contracts with building projects, road repair work or government "Working for Water" projects. Husbands and fathers are absent for long periods if they work in cities such as Pietermaritzburg or Durban. It is not possible to get accurate figures, but anecdotal evidence points to more and more households headed by grandmothers as parents become ill and die of AIDS.

There is little in the area to support literacy development and few opportunities for children to see print around them in the forms of newspapers, books, magazines, signs, street advertising or even food packages. Nothing in their immediate area has signposts and until the project provided books, there were few apart from older siblings' schoolbooks and adult literacy workbooks.

The FLP attempts to help parents to improve their own levels of literacy as well as giving them information on how they can help their young children develop early literacy skills and supporting them as they do so. The closest translation of the project slogan "Masifunde

Njengomndeni” is “Families reading together” and the main aim of the project is to encourage its members to see reading as a shared pleasure and valuable skill. The work of the project is based on a belief that for young children to become literate, reading and writing must be introduced into their lives as desirable and enjoyable skills. Adults who care for them (parents and teachers) should guide them and by example, demonstrate the importance and the joy of being literate.

Each of the seven FLP groups meets twice a week for a two-hour session. Seven or eight sessions make up a unit and each unit covers a topic of interest to the women, for example HIV/AIDS, children’s rights, child protection, water (see Figure 1 for a Family Literacy Project model unit).

Every unit begins with a session that draws from the women what they already know about the topic. The women are engaged through the use of participatory learning activities and are encouraged to discuss the topic thoroughly before moving on to write down the main points from the session. Those who are only beginning to write are given a word or two from the discussion to practise writing. One of the sessions of each unit is dedicated to ways in which parents can help their children’s early literacy development through activities linked to the topic, for example how to take care of oneself, storytelling to practise sequencing and recall, or games that help children spot small differences between shapes. Sessions draw on materials developed or acquired by the project such as posters, leaflets, workbooks and readers. Every group has a small library with books for both adults and children. The women borrow these and each week meet for an informal “book club” session at which they discuss the book they are returning. They are encouraged to borrow books to read with their children and this is helpful to those women who are only beginning to read and need simple texts and lots of visual clues.

The women are encouraged to engage in a number of free writing activities such as making notices for the community notice board, contributing letters to the FLP newsletter (called *Masifunde Njengomndeni*), telling and writing stories of their own childhood, having pen friends in neighbouring groups and keeping a journal known as Umzali Nengane (translated as Parents and Children). The latter is the most important of these activities. The women cut pictures from magazines (or use those provided by the project), glue them into the journal and then talk about them with their children. They then record the conversation they have with their children in the journal. Entries range from a few words to several paragraphs depending on the parents’ level of literacy. The project provides guidance on how to talk to children to develop early literacy skills such as recall, speculation, sequencing, colour and shape recognition. Parents are also encouraged to make journal entries of daily activities such as meal or bath times and record comments and questions from their children.

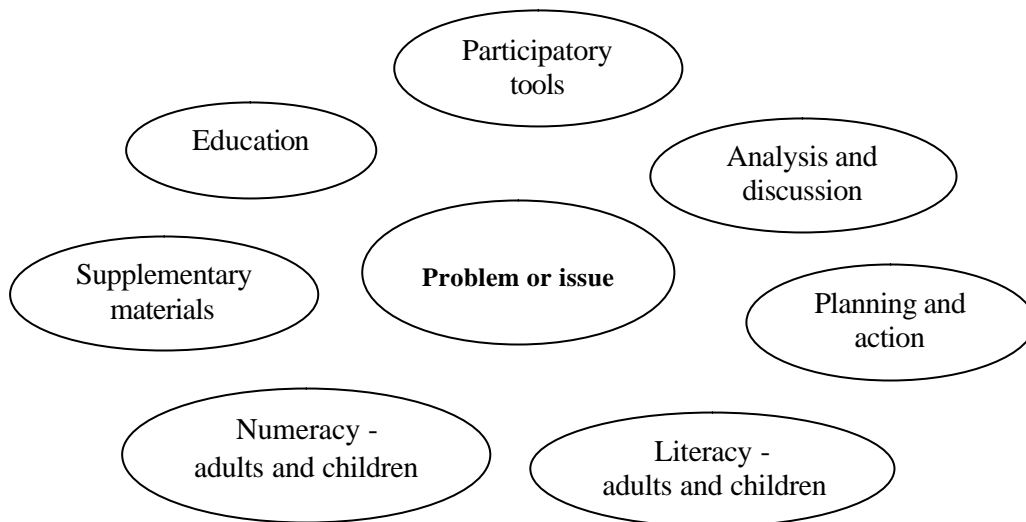
Each FLP group is led by a facilitator chosen by the community. The only requirement of facilitators is that they have a matriculation certificate and speak English in addition to their mother tongue, Zulu. They were trained in participatory rural appraisal techniques, adult literacy and early literacy either by the project coordinator or by other providers. Facilitators register for (and some have already successfully completed) a certificate course in early childhood development. Since this research was conducted, all facilitators have successfully completed a certificate course in adult basic education.

Research method

The main aim of the research was to attempt to find answers to the following questions:

- What were parents’ attitudes towards early childhood literacy at the beginning of the intervention by the FLP?
- Has there been a change in the parents’ attitudes to their role in the development of early literacy skills in their children?
- Has there been a change in behaviour of parents at home with their young children?

Figure 1 – Family Literacy Project model unit



Explanation of the model unit

There are no arrows showing direction because Literacy and Numeracy, Supplementary materials and Education will be brought in several times in one learning cycle or unit.

- Problem or issue: Something relevant to the group such as crime or AIDS.
- Participatory tools: These include maps, Venn diagrams, trees, time lines; they provide an opportunity to look more closely at the problem or issue and give the learners a chance to write or draw their concerns.
- Analysis and discussion: Questioning at this point is very important.
- Planning and action: This is where the group decides what action to take to tackle the problem. The adult literacy teacher is a facilitator, not a member of any action planned.
- Literacy - adults and children: Opportunities for this can and must be created during any of the steps. For the adults, these can be taken from the Operation Upgrade workbooks. For the children, one session must be spent on an activity parents can do at home with their young children; the activity should promote development of early literacy skills and should be linked to the problem or issue.
- Numeracy - adults and children: Opportunities will arise throughout the unit for activities that will build numeracy skills in the adults. For the children, one session must be spent on an activity parents can do at home with their young children; the activity should promote development of early numeracy skills and should be linked to the problem or issue.
- Supplementary materials: Leaflets, books, posters or anything related to the problem or issue; the materials developed by the FLP are used here.
- Education: An outsider who will speak on an aspect of the problem or issue for example, a clinic sister.

The answers to these questions would indicate whether or not the level of interest displayed in group sessions had translated into behaviour changes in the adults.

As project coordinator, I played a major role in the interventions as well as being the person who collected and analysed the data. This was a bias that could not be avoided as I designed many of the interventions, delivered some of them (through a translator) and also managed the provision of materials such as books and other printed and audio materials.

I conducted in-depth interviews with four women participants from the Mpumlwane FLP group but will only draw from one set, those with Thuli Molefe (mother and child's names have been changed). This account shows a progression from few literacy activities to an interest in reading with children and an understanding of how important it is to their development. Apart from any other activities in the study, the interviews with Thuli Molefe described in the next section, provide answers to the three research questions posed above. I chose this set of interviews as they showed a clear progression towards an understanding of a parent's role in early literacy development.

Thuli was interviewed three times. When interviewing her in February 2001, I used an interview schedule but asked additional questions to clarify answers. This was followed by a further set of questions in March 2001 to elicit more information on areas not fully explored in the first interview. The questions related to her background, her family and economic status and the aspirations she had for herself and her children. The questions which related to her interaction with her pre-school child attempted to draw out information about how much time she spent with her children and whether or not this time was solely related to meeting physical needs such as rest and nutrition. The final interview, in October 2001, was to collect information on what changes had been made in the way she viewed her role in the development of early literacy skills in her children.

All the interviews with parents were conducted through a translator although the women did understand a little English and I understood some of the responses given in Zulu. At times I asked a follow-up question if there was a need to clarify the answer given. Where I use quotes, these are in the English of the translator.

Thuli Molefe

Thuli Molefe is a quietly confident woman who, the first time I visited the group, quickly volunteered for the initial activity of drawing a map of the area. She was born in 1968 at Ndulwini and spoke about enjoying the Zulu dancing and gardening there, saying only that she did not like the housebreaking by some members of that community. After completing Std 3 (Grade 5) her parents took her out of school to look after the family's cattle. In 1988 she married and moved to Mpumlwane. Her husband, with whom she had one child, died in 1990 and she has a new partner who works in the area. She has two other children. The youngest girl Thandi, was born in 1997 and attends Fundulwazi Pre-School.

Thuli enjoys cleaning her house and watching her television. When asked what she hoped to be doing in five years time she said she would like to be employed, perhaps as a cleaner. Her long-term plans were to learn to speak English and understand more about maths and to be a teacher. Thuli's days starts at five in the morning when she gets up to prepare her children for school and pre-school. Other tasks in the day include fetching firewood and repairing her house (both of which she finds difficult) and tending her garden. She also attends FLP group meetings and belongs to the local sewing group. She worries about her cattle and goats straying and about having to meet all expenses for school, her home and special occasions such as Christmas, as she only has a monthly R400 widow's pension. Her hopes for the future include being able to "pass at adult school to be equal to others in the country" and she will try "with all her power" to make sure her children get more education than she had. Thuli's aspirations are like those of the parents referred to by Auerbach, who see "literacy and schooling as the key to mobility, to changing their status and preventing their children from suffering as they have" (Auerbach 1994:15).

During the first interview Thuli said that she used to think that it was not interesting to read books but has since changed her mind. At the beginning of the year she said the books she had at home were the children's schoolbooks, booklets cut from a newspaper supplement and *Bona* magazines from the FLP. The books were placed high up and although her pre-school child knew where they were, she could not reach them and had to ask her mother if she wanted to look at them. Thuli now has books borrowed from the FLP and her daughter Thandi takes these to look at on her own or with her mother. If Thandi is looking at a book on her own, Thuli asks her to sit on a mat so that the book is kept clean. She said in the second interview, that for the first time in her life she had bought a newspaper (*Ilanga*) and a magazine (*Bona*).

All Thuli's children attended pre-school and she said she thought that Thandi would benefit because she did not have a "quick mind". In the first interview, when describing what she did with her pre-school child, Thuli said she washed her, gave her a packed lunch and walked her to pre-school. In the second interview she said the three most important things she did with Thandi were to read a book, to ask her to collect things to check if she knows the names of different items, and to do things with her child although if she is busy, she does ask her to wait. In the first interview she described her child's day by saying that she went to pre-school, played with a ball, ate food and fetched cattle. She gave more detail in the second interview, responding that now Thandi reminds her mother to read a book or a magazine and when they do, the other children join them.

When asked initially if she read to her pre-school child, Thuli said she did although she thought that only when children were over seven would they understand stories. She gave as an example of a story, talking about giving information about her whereabouts, for example that she was going shopping. In a later interview, Thuli was able to give the title of her child's favourite book and say what it was about, something she was unable to do at the time of the first interview. Changes that she noticed between the first and later interviews were that Thandi could now count and likes to read. When Thuli reads all her children now take their books and read as well, something they did not do before. Her partner shows her letters, for example from the Department of Home Affairs, and asks for her help. She laughed when she said this and commented that perhaps he was testing her to see what she had learnt. She also said that she now understands pronouns and how to construct a sentence in English.

Of the free writing activities, Thuli said she liked writing in her journal because it reminded her to help her child. She completed 12 pages of pictures and recordings of interactions with her child. Throughout there is evidence that if her child had a question or was not clear about the picture, then Thuli helped with explanations. For example, alongside a picture of yachts is written:

Thandi says that she sees the white umbrellas in the cars then I told her that that's the boat and she also see houses in a forest.

There is also evidence of Thuli extending conversations with her child. For example, alongside a picture of two girls preparing to race is written:

Thandi says that she see the boys wearing tights.
No Thandi, that's not the boys but they are the girls. Yes, they are wearing tights and vests.
I ask, what are they doing? She says, they are standing.
I said, what do they want to do? She says they want to run.
I said to her, do you like running, she answered, yes. She started running.

Thuli showed her sense of humour when she wrote:

Thandi let's start bathing now it's the time to go to pre-school. Take the bath basin and the soap container ... I asked her What do we call the part I'm washing now? She said, it's a head, then she continues saying other parts on her body. What she forgets I remind her. But she never forgets the bums.

Thuli recorded her thoughts on her role as a parent alongside the written guidelines from the FLP on how to talk to your child:

Describe and discuss

- Give names to things. Your child may not know what objects around her are called. Help her to learn these names.
- Describe the things you see or the actions you are doing. Talk about the colour, size or shape. Talk about what things are used for. Ask your child for her ideas about what she sees or what she is doing. (From unpublished FLP guidelines on how to talk to young children.)

Thuli wrote:

I will always keep encouraging them with their school work because I want them to be on a good standard or level than where I am. Head, forehead, face, mouth. Mielie meal is white, blood is red, bread is brown, vegetables are green.

Make links

- Help your child to see the connection between what you are talking about and other things in her life.
- You could ask questions that start with these words:
 - What if.....
 - Can you imagine if
- Do you remember when (From unpublished FLP guidelines on how to talk to young children).

Thuli wrote:

What can you do if you wake up early in the morning? I will wake up, go to the kitchen and ask tea from Mom.

Do you remember the time when you were visiting by your mother's home that you were travelling on a tractor? Yes Mom I remember there we ate a duck's meat.

Reflect

- Let the child take the lead in the conversation. Listen to what she says. Give her the chance to ask you questions.
- Think about what you have done or what you have seen. (From unpublished FLP guidelines on how to talk to young children).

Thuli wrote:

I sometimes ask Thandi what they have learnt at pre-school. It is also good to listen to your child when she is talking to you. Mom now I know how to cut pictures. I saw toys at pre-school.

Thuli wrote two letters in response to my request made in the FLP newsletter. In her first letter, written in April 2001, she referred to the project newsletter which she said encouraged her to read and also helped her to understand that she should read to and help her young child. She said she wanted to help others learn, as well as helping her own children.

The second letter was written in August 2001 and included information on her child:

I have a child who is attending pre-school and she is four years old. We sit together and discuss family members. She can mention them, father, mother, brother and sister. I find it easy now to communicate with her. She enjoys cutting pictures and she uses all my exercise books. I normally ask her whether she is not going to school, we bath together and dress together and after that she asks for her handkerchief. She also asked for her lunch box, what I have noticed is that she likes to copy things that are being done by adults. When I go to the garden to water plants, fetch water, sweeping to the other room, building houses with mud, when others go to fetch the donkeys and cows she is always there.

From these findings, it appears that Thuli has found it interesting and enjoyable to work with her young child. The ways in which the FLP suggested she engage with Thandi appeared to appeal to

her and she was excited enough by the responses to write about what she and her daughter did together.

Conclusion

In the initial interviews, in answer to specific questions three of the women talked about reading or telling stories to their children. By the final interview all four women talked more about how and what they read to their children. They all gave the title of their child's favourite book and said something about the content. Their answers also showed that they were encouraging children to handle books with care as they spoke about making sure that the children sat on mats when reading rather than on the dried mud floor or in a sandy yard.

By the end of the study all four women talked more freely and with more understanding about their children's literacy activities. Their behaviour appears to have changed from a great emphasis on catering for physical needs to that of modelling and encouraging literacy activities such as reading, questioning, listening, observing and describing. Their interactions were appropriate to the age of their children and they demonstrated, through their answers and writing, care and gentle encouragement. The project did not discuss how to teach children to read and write but the women did make reference to their encouraging their children to start to write.

While it is not possible to say that these are changes that are solely a result of the interventions made in the FLP sessions, it is probable that these sessions provided the stimulus and the opportunity for the women to explore more fully the role they play in their children's development. They mentioned how they have learnt that they have a role to play and they also talked about different activities they engaged in with their children.

The provision of books for adults and children is vital as without these, the women could not implement many of the ideas discussed in the group sessions. All the women and children now read or look at books together and this has engaged the interest of other family members. The women provided a picture of families sharing a book or sitting together with each family member engrossed in his or her own book.

The interventions of the FLP facilitators and myself as coordinator appear to have stimulated the women and built on the desire, already present, for their children to have a better education than they had. By the end of the study the women appeared to have a greater understanding of their role in their children's education and the influence of the home environment. The women were already concerned about their children's education and were taking steps to improve their own levels of literacy. What the FLP interventions appear to have achieved is to provide a forum for discussion about early childhood development, activities to develop particular skills and books for the children to read.

The FLP interventions are not expensive. The most expensive part of the programme is the provision of reading material. The activities recommended to develop early childhood literacy skills use local resources and rely mostly on parents interacting with their children. I feel confident that the work of the FLP has had an impact on the lives of at least some of the women involved in it and would speculate that this is because of the way in which the information is presented (for example, by a teacher from the community) and embedded in adult literacy work based on topics relevant to group members. I would go further and say that the women want their children to have a better start in life than they feel they had. This attitude makes it easier for the women to try new ways of behaving and accept new ideas.

To conclude it would appear that the interventions of the FLP, although still needing some refinement, are relevant and delivered in an accessible way. However it appears that it is the group members themselves and their positive responses to the interventions, that is what leads to the changes observed.

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