



Universität Hamburg

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A conversation on family literacy: Issues, challenges and opportunities, with a special focus on South countries

Context

Family literacy programming is common practice in some North countries, but is being increasingly seen in South countries as a means of developing the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes of parents so they can better prepare their children for entry into the formal primary school system and to continue to support them throughout their school experience.

On July 1, 2009, the University of Hamburg (UH) and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) co-hosted a conversation on family literacy with a focus on South countries. The Conversation, held at the University of Hamburg (Alsterterrasse 1, Room 527) brought together experts from both host institutions, from the Landesinstitut für Lehrerbildung und Schulentwicklung in Hamburg and from the Centre for Family Literacy in Canada, as well as staff of UIL, researchers, students and professors from UH (see Appendix 1 for complete participant list).

Report content

This report first presents a summary of the key issues, challenges and opportunities that emerged from the presentations and subsequent conversations between participants. The key strategic actions for future directions and actions proposed by the participants are presented in the final section of this report.

Process

The conversation was designed to encourage participation and discussion. Key topics relating to family literacy were first addressed through presentations by experts in the field. Each presentation was followed by a general discussion initiated from the critical perspective and key questions provided by designated participants. These presentations were followed by a general discussion on key issues, challenges and opportunities that derived from the first steps. At the end, participants proposed next steps to furthering reflection and action on family literacy, with a focus on South countries. (see Appendix 2 for the programme)

Summary of presentations and emerging issues, challenges and opportunities

Introductions

Prof. Doctor Gordon Mitchell, University of Hamburg and Dr. Ulrike Hanemann, UIL welcomed the participants and presented information on the genesis of the conversation and the objectives.

The final session of the day was used to review key learnings and to put forward ideas for possible future directions, actions and collaborations.

Definitions

Yvon Laberge, University of Hamburg was the first presenter. He introduced definitions of family literacy and presented some of the challenges and issues in trying to apply North definitions and practices to South contexts. He introduced two definitions, one used by the Centre for Family Literacy and the other used by the European QualiFLY project. The Centre for Family Literacy in Canada adapted the following definition from the International Reading Association: “the ways parents, children and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community”. •The QualiFLY project used the following definition: "Family literacy is an approach to learning that focuses on intergenerational interactions within the family and community which promote the development of literacy and related life skills". Laberge made a distinction between family literacy and family literacy programmes. He noted that parents do not necessarily have all the skills required to create the necessary environment that will contribute to the development of literacy skills in young children nor to support them during their formal schooling. Family literacy programmes generally aim at improving the literacy skills of children by imparting parents with short-term skills, but also striving for long-term changes in families. These include:

- Improving parenting skills
- Teaching parents ways to support and encourage emerging literacy skills in children

- Supporting children's school education
- Improving adults' basic skills, including literacy
- Changing attitudes to lifelong learning

Laberge then framed the particular challenges of applying North country definitions to South contexts by introducing a conceptual framework for a family literacy programme in Niger. He noted that in North countries, parents usually have a minimal level of literacy, whereas in Niger many parents and especially women, have limited or no literacy skills. Moreover, in Niger, the language of schooling is French and most often not spoken by the parents. Women are most often targeted by family literacy programmes, but in Niger domestic duties often occupy all their time. Therefore, participation in a family literacy programme would have to be conditional on the incorporation of activities aimed at reducing their workload (for example, revenue generating programmes). He further posits that using a thematic approach, programmes can offer participants information on topics such as hygiene, children's physical and psychological development, nutrition and gender empowerment. Laberge urges that programmes must work from the strengths of families, celebrate the cultural and linguistic uniqueness of communities and that genuine change occurs through meaningful dialogue that leads participants to make sense of issues in their lives and builds pathways for action and social change.

Examples of programmes in North and South countries

Maren Elfert, UIL then provided an overview of family literacy programmes in North and South countries. Elfert noted that most programmes are delivered by NGOs with unstable funding. She gave examples of programmes in the UK and the US that have been institutionalized or programmes in the New Zealand and Namibia that receive large scale government funding. Elfert introduced programmes from different countries involved in the European Union funded QualiFLY project involving six different countries. She went into more detail about the Turkish AÇEV programmes targeting mothers and fathers and funded through the Mother Child Education Foundation and two school based programmes in Malta. She also highlighted programmes from South countries, including: and parents in the KwaZulu-Natal area of South Africa; a family basic education programme in Uganda that includes basic literacy and numeracy sessions for adults enhanced by parent-child activities and home visits; the family literacy programme of the Ministry of Education in Namibia; the Malian programme called "Support for the Quality and Equity of Education" that targets parents associations and enable parents to contribute to the management of the schools; and the unique Guatemalan project where children teach their parents. She concluded with a list of shared issues between North and South countries:

- All parents are motivated to support their children
- Schools are isolated and often located outside the communities instead of being a part of them
- Family literacy builds a bridge between schools and adults
- Parents need to be sensitized with regard to (their children's) education

The Centre for Family Literacy: A best practice model

Randy Boissonnault representing the Centre for Family Literacy (CFL) in Canada shared some of the best practices used by CFL to support family literacy programmes. CFL is an NGO with a multiple mandate to provide local adult and family literacy programmes, but that is also engaged in developing and delivering training to family literacy practitioners, conducts research and that does awareness and advocacy work. Randy presented the good practices model inspired from approximately 15 years of research and practice:

1. **Intergenerational:** work with parents and children, directly or indirectly, to establish an intergenerational cycle of literacy achievement.
2. **Collaborative:** recognize the importance of collaboration, and are developed, delivered, and continually improved with participant and community input.
3. **Build on strengths:** build on literacy behaviours and strengths already present in families, and introduce additional strategies to help further enrich literacy activities in the home.
4. **Responsive:** flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of the families who participate in them.
5. **Culturally-sensitive:** and use resources that are appropriate for specific participant groups.
6. **Essence of family literacy:** celebrate and emphasize the joy of learning.
7. **Sound methods:** follow sound educational practices, appropriate for the literacy development of children and adults. Practitioners select from a variety of research-based approaches according to the needs of each group.
8. **Staff qualifications:** qualified and trained staff appropriate to the educational needs of children and adults and appropriate to specific roles and responsibilities within a particular delivery model.
9. **Access:** held in accessible, welcoming locations. Support is given to overcome barriers to participation, such as lack of child care.
10. **Evaluation:** on-going, manageable evaluation process that produces information useful for program development and accountability.

Boissonnault also introduced CFL's training services which include sessions on different delivery models, a two day introduction to family literacy workshop and a more comprehensive five day foundational training programme developed and delivered. Foundational training includes topics such as emergent literacy, working with families, best practices, administration and program evaluation.

From pilot project to sustainability – the FörMig Transfer Project

Dr. Gabriele Rabkin, Landesinstitut für Lehrerbildung und Schulentwicklung (State Institute for Teacher Training and School Development) in Hamburg presented the FLY family literacy pilot project (FLY project) and a follow-up transfer and implementation strategy (*FörMig Transfer Project*). The five-year FLY co-operation project between UIL and the State Institute for Teacher Training and School Development aimed at improving the literacy skills of parents and children with migrant-backgrounds in

Hamburg. The *FLY-Project* funded by the German Bund-Länder-Commission for Educational Planning and Research Promotion contained activities based on three key elements: 1) Active involvement of parents in teaching (with children in class); 2) work with parents (without children) parallel to the teaching in the class; and 3) joint out-of-school activities. Between 2009 and 2013, the *FörMig Transfer Project* aims at implementing the FLY concept in 75 schools in disadvantaged areas in Hamburg. The multiple benefits for parents and children identified in internal and external evaluations warranted a replication and expansion of the programme to other schools.

Family literacy in South countries: Issues, challenges and opportunities

Set within the context of the Education for All (EFA) goals and issues that arise from them, Dr. Ulrike Hanemann, UIL discussed some of the key challenges and opportunities to family literacy in South countries. She noted that although EFA is a comprehensive approach to basic education, most governments miss opportunities to connect early childhood, primary and secondary education and adult education. She argues that family literacy can bridge formal and non-formal education, especially between early childhood and adult education. But to be sustainable, communities must take ownership of the programmes and family literacy must be “mainstreamed” into local, regional and national policy. Hanemann also underlined that an enabling literacy environment is vital to support, nurture and develop newly acquired skills. She asked how especially in rural areas, can a literate environment linked to the genuine needs of communities be created and maintained. In the context of financial constraints of many governments and their reliance on external aid to provide formal and non formal education services, she asked if a new approach would have to depend on existing synergies and continue building on the commitment of learners, teachers and the community. In her analysis, Hanemann also reflected on the important role that family literacy programmes targeting women or that address power relationships within the family structure could play in reducing gender inequities. Delivering programmes in and for a multilingual context also poses challenges. How can more texts be made available at local levels in local languages and that value indigenous knowledge? Through family literacy programmes, how can we systematically develop language skills to communicate at home, in the community, in the wider society and even internationally? Hanemann further put forward the idea that teachers and facilitators form the backbone of family literacy programmes, but that they require adequate training, monitoring and support.

Key future directions, actions and collaborations

The participants expressed a desire to continue learning and exchanging on family literacy. They also said that the dialogue between North and South countries needed to be extended to include more individuals. They want to expand practice and to promote the creation and sharing of knowledge through continued dialogue. The following actions are linked to these aims and relate to the key issues and opportunities raised during the conversation.

- **Encourage and foster greater awareness about family literacy to raise the profile of family literacy around the world, but especially in South countries**

Key actions:

- Develop key messages
- Develop advocacy and awareness communication strategies
- Develop awareness raising materials and make them available

- **Encourage and support the exchange of information on family literacy**

Key actions:

- Prepare a summary report of the Conversation and distribute to a wide audience through key networks such as the UIL website and newsletter distribution list, NALD, etc;
- Create a conversation group on the web where people can exchange on key topics related to family literacy. Initially, participants in the Conversation will be invited and latter, others from the North and the South will invited to join;
- Bring North and South together for a more detailed conversation.

- **Expand current collaborative networks and create new partnerships**

Key actions:

- Link family literacy programmes to other international NGOs such as Rotary Clubs, Literacy without Borders, GTZ, etc;
- Find ways to improve collaboration between key partners and organizations on initiatives such as TTISSA and LIFE;
- Extend the collaboration between UH and UIL and expand the network by inviting key partners from the South.

- **Encourage and support discussion and action for the integration of family literacy into education policy.**

Key actions:

- Prepare a concept paper for policy makers explaining the theoretical and practical benefits of family literacy and propose examples and strategies for its integration into policy;
- Organize an international policy dialogue regarding literacy and family literacy education of teachers and other educators;
- Promote access to short-term and ongoing funding for family literacy.

- **Encourage and support the development of family literacy in South countries.**
Key actions:
 - Given existing synergies, begin with LIFE countries.

- **Encourage and support train-the-trainer and practitioner training in family literacy.**
Key actions:
 - Conduct a review of family literacy training activities around the world (e.g. Foundational training in family literacy offered by the CFL);
 - Develop and implement a training strategy for South countries.

- **Encourage and support research in family literacy**
Key actions:
 - Establish a mechanism to encourage, facilitate and conduct scholarly research on family literacy and provide avenues for the dissemination of research findings and for sharing of new knowledge about family literacy. This could take the form of a centre that would act as a catalyst for collaboration between academic and practitioner researchers from around the world, as well as create opportunities and synergies for the creation of new research and new research practices in family literacy, as well as help develop a new generation of researchers.

For more information:

At UIL:

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At UH:

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Appendix 1: Participant list

Name	Affiliation	Email address
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Appendix 2: Programme

Time	Discussion Topic	Presenter
10:00 – 10:30	Welcome and Introductions	Prof. Gordon Mitchell, University of Hamburg Dr. Ulrike Hanemann, UIL
10:30 – 11:15	Issues in defining family literacy: A comparative perspective between North and South countries	Yvon Laberge, University of Hamburg
11:15 – 12:00	Overview of family literacy programmes: Examples from North and South countries	Maren Elfert, UIL
12:00- 13:00	Lunch	
13:00 – 13:45	Supporting family literacy programmes: The Centre for Family Literacy as a best practices model	Randy Boissonnault, Centre for Family Literacy (Canada)
13:45 – 14:30	Family Literacy in Hamburg: Project, transfer and implementation strategy	Dr. Gabriele Rabkin Landesinstitut für Lehrerbildung und Schulentwicklung
14:30 – 15:00	Issues, challenges and opportunities for family literacy in South countries	Dr. Ulrike Hanemann, UIL
15:00-15:45	Discussing the potential – Based on what we learned, what are some possible future directions, actions and collaborations?	Facilitated discussion
15:45-16:00	Closing remarks	Participants