

L550: Issues in Public Librarianship
Fall, 2005

Committee Project Essay:
Libraries and Family Literacy

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This Committee Project was highly valuable for me. It allowed me to continue to pursue my own interests in family literacy, and to explore questions I have had about public library participation in family literacy programs. I found new resources and new research that I hadn't seen before, and appreciated all my team-mates' contributions to the project. I remain extremely grateful as well to the readers of NIFL's Family Literacy listserv, who gave such thoughtful and heartfelt answers to my questions about the roles of libraries in family literacy programs. Not only did they provide some truly choice material for our presentation, but their real-world examples confirmed and expanded on the impression I had received from the literature—primarily that a frustrating disconnect exists between library services/library culture and the habits of family literacy programs based in adult-education efforts, throwing up barriers from both sides. I noted three varieties of this disconnect:

1. family literacy programs that send their clients to the library, but do not have a relationship with the library and its staff (e.g., Even Start, and most community-college-based programs)
2. family literacy programs that are run by literacy workers in the library without sufficient buy-in from library staff or sufficient understanding of the library by the literacy workers (e.g., Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative)
3. library-centric programs that tend to bypass local literacy efforts by other agencies (e.g., PrimeTime—otherwise admirable for the fun it brings to families, and its humanities-oriented collaborations)

When library involvement in a family literacy program does not stem from thoroughgoing partnership, in which all sides strive to build and maintain harmony with

each others' goals, needs, and methods, the result can be frustration for the partners and failure for the program. In other words, library staff must be fully invested—and that investment must be continually renewed—while literacy workers must recognize the resources and culture of the library. The Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative illustrates this principle with an almost startling precision. Here is a program that has been in place nearly twenty years, and was established from the beginning as a joint project of the literacy organization and the libraries where the program takes place—yet the partners remain unsynchronized, and must continually struggle to communicate their goals and to reaffirm their understanding of each other and their mutual commitment to the partnership in family literacy.

Anita's discussion of critiques of family literacy programs may have been the most meaningful aspect of our Committee Project for me. Cultural bias, in particular, is a trap for this kind of work. Who decides what good parenting is? Family literacy programs definitely endorse a particular style of parenting, emphasizing a level of overt, showy engagement—in front of other people, too, at the family literacy program events—that may not fit every cultural background or every personality. You can be a good parent, and a good learning partner with your child, without conforming to every precept of that standard. The Hendrix article Anita used to support her segment of the presentation was particularly useful in this regard. In my former life as a graduate student in Folklore and Ethnomusicology, awareness of one's own cultural biases was an issue I took deeply to heart. Recognizing one's own assumptions about life, the universe and everything, and being willing to analyze those assumptions and step back from them to comprehend someone else's, constitute the first steps in cross-cultural understanding.

Other points well worth making include the fact that far too many family literacy programs focus on parents (or just the mother) and young children—ignoring other family members, i.e., teens, extended family, and elders. The best programs welcome and engage the whole family, if only at the “fun” intergenerational events. I have been fortunate enough to be a part of some of those fun events through my involvement with the local Family Literacy Coordinators, representing the Mathers Museum by bringing family crafts and games from many cultures to school-wide events attended by the whole family. Another point that impressed all of us on the committee, but perhaps was not stressed clearly in our presentation, stemmed from Belzer’s “I don’t crave to read” article. Classroom-based programs represent a particular difficulty for adult learners, who remember school as the scene of discouragement, frustration and failure. This is one reason why family literacy makes such a difference: it makes reading (and learning) fun and meaningful, because it’s for your kids, and it stems at least in part from children’s literature rather than texts that may feel either patronizing or laborious.

Much of the professional literature, at least on the level of *American Libraries* and *Public Libraries*, takes a rah-rah approach to encouraging librarians: honor the best, celebrate the successful, share good ideas and point the way for others. All of those positives are good things, but by themselves they do not constitute a balanced professional diet. Critiques like Hendrix’ are rarely to be found in the official association journals. Family literacy practitioner resources like www.familit.org and the articles available through NIFL’s LINC database also tend to either emphasize the positive, or present the negative points only in lengthy, less accessible reports. Our class’ Family Literacy papers were, by and large, so similar due to the fact that too many of us (myself

included) relied primarily on library literature, and did not look very far further afield. In my case this happened because I was trying to 1) keep my paper within the painful limit of three pages (I got so used to writing 20-p. papers in my life as a Folklore student that writing *short* can be ridiculously difficult); and 2) keep my paper focused on the course topic of public libraries.

When we chose our topics at the beginning of the semester, I was surprised to get such a strong response to family literacy from my classmates, especially considering the fact that so many of them apparently had not heard of it before. I was disappointed, in fact, that the Digital Divide or services to immigrants (other topics in the far-too-long list of my own suggestions) did not win sufficient votes to be considered for a team, while CIPA won so many, yet could be seen as having attained the status of “done to death” in the literature. Maybe others felt that the Digital Divide issue was done to death; maybe they wanted an “easy” topic like CIPA: very specifically focused, with a wide range of controversial material to draw on.

As I graduate from SLIS with my MLS, I will actively seek opportunities to put all of these lessons to work. Family literacy efforts can have enormous benefits when done right. To do it right, ideally we need real library involvement, where the library welcomes family literacy clients and is ready to serve them. The public library should be the best place for anyone to have positive experiences with reading and life-long learning. The barriers to effective library participation in family literacy programs bring to the fore once again the perpetual struggle within the profession between the middle-class impulses and biases of traditional readers and the social-worker ideals of certain strains of librarianship.

References

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