

**The Identification and Description of Literacy Events in Which Children Engage
During and After Parental Involvement in a Family Literacy Program**

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One of the goals in the Transfer of Learning in a Parent Focussed Family Literacy Program (see first article in this series) was to validate and describe literacy events in which parents and children took part. Literacy events have been identified by Barton and Hamilton (1998) as key occasions of literacy use in peoples' lives. Barton and Hamilton also describe literacy practices which incorporate literacy events. For the purpose of this study, a literacy event was based on Barton and Hamilton's work on literacy events and practices. A literacy event was defined in terms of the following characteristics:

EVENT NAME

PARTICIPANTS

Initiator

Others

TIME

PLACE

ACTIVITIES/MATERIALS

GOALS

FEEDBACK/CLOSURE

In brief, a literacy event constituted an occasion when two or more participants engaged in print/language activities for a certain purpose and which culminated in closure and feedback to the participants.

The data showed that literacy events could be identified. A total of 50 such events were described; these constituted the first 50 occurrences of literacy involvement between parents and children that either were observed or were described by the parents (22 events were observed while 28 were reported by the parent or other adult). These ranged across all the children in the sample and not just from the top and bottom

quartiles. A summary of the components of these literacy events are given below followed by a description of two literacy events.

Summary Data on Literacy Events

EVENT NAME: The literacy events could be grouped into three categories: activities from the PRINTS Program, other activities which were familiar to the parents, and spontaneous occurrences. As might be expected, the majority of events were from the PRINTS Program and are listed below. Sometimes an event was observed or noted more than once; when this happened, the number of times it was noticed is in parentheses.

Activities from the PRINTS Program

- Reading With Children (8)
- What We See! What We Hear! (1)
- Nursery Rhymes (2)
- Storytelling Cues (2)
- Alphabet House (3)
- Guess the Picture (2)
- I Spy (3)
- Climb the Ladder (3)
- Slippery Worm (4)
- Using Play dough to make Story Characters (1)
- Learning from a Walk Around (Signs in the Community) (1)
- Matching Labels and Products (3)
- Patterns for Letters (1)
- Boss and the Secretary (1)
- A Book About Me (2)

Activities Familiar to Parents

- Letter Bingo (2)
- Printing names on labels and putting them on furniture
- Using a cutout of a train and boxcars with a category label for the train, eg., clothes, and examples cut from flyers in the different box cars
- Clown faces - a large cutout of clown faces - one happy and one sad. On the happy face are labels of the different face parts and on the sad face, one label has been misplaced; the child is to compare both faces and find which one - why the clown is sad.

- Match the Hats. This was based on the Climb the Ladder game in which the child has to match a picture by another picture of the same category (cut from flyers). In Match the Hats, the parent had two hats, on each of which was pinned a picture from a particular category (toy, clothes, etc.). Other pictures from this category were put in a bag. Whoever drew the matching picture first could pin in on the hat and wear the hat. Then a picture from another category was used, and so on.
- Matching letters from flyers to products.
- Grocery shopping cues. The parent cut pictures of objects from flyers. She then took these grocery shopping with her child. The parent contributed: "I take her to the right aisle and give her the picture and she finds the object that it goes with".
- Computer software games.

Spontaneous Activities

- On a walk to the store, watching for people wearing clothes with print on them
- Writing a get well letter to grandma who is in hospital
- Putting a daily word on the fridge in magnetic letters
- In putting groceries away, the parent would say, "There are two tins of Chicken Soup. Can you find them"?

EVENT INITIATOR Of the 50 events, 30 were parent initiated, and 20 were child initiated. Discussions with the parents showed that at the beginning they initiated all activities. As time went by, the children either requested or became involved in events, expecting the parent or other adult to take part. Several parents noted that children request involvement at the "oddest times", such as playing the *I Spy Game* during supper time.

Those who participated in the events covered a range of other people. Sometimes these were involved on their own with the child and sometimes more than one adult was involved at the same time. These included a grandmother and grandfather, older sister, cousin, aunt, babysitter, and friend of the family who had dropped in.

TIME: There was no particular time when the literacy events occurred with the exception of *Reading With Children* which usually occurred just after supper. Other

times when the events occurred included after school when siblings came home, morning or afternoon, before bedtime, and when the child showed interest.

PLACE: As in the case of TIME, there were a variety of places in which the events took place. These included the kitchen table, bedroom, living room, car, doctor's office, outdoors.

ACTIVITIES/MATERIALS: The activities were determined by the nature of the activity. As indicated, most of the events were centered around activities from the PRINTS Program. The parents/adults (or children) already had the necessary materials, such as the game, *Slippery Worm*. In some cases, there were no required materials such as for the events centering around I Spy, and the events that were Spontaneous. In the case of the most common event, Reading With Children, books were necessary. In three out of five instances when parents (or others) initiated this event, they let the child chose the book. In the three times the child initiated the event, he/she had chosen the book to be read. *A Book About Me* and the *Train and Boxcars* were the two activities which involved constructing a product and consisted of a wider range of raw materials than the other events.

GOALS: Of the 50 events, goals were only overtly specified in five of them. That is, the parent introduced the activity to the child by providing a definite goal. For example, in making puppet story figures, the parent said, "Let's see if we can make puppet figures for the people in the story." However, in all, the parents/adults could verbalize why they participated with the children in the events. Goals by parents were more specific to the activity and reflected what they had learned about the PRINTS Program. They were able to state why the activity would be beneficial, for example, playing *Slippery Worm* would teach the child sequence, numbers 1-9, turn taking, etc. Sometimes, the parents had other motives. In one instance, the parent noted she thought the child was bored while they waited to walk down to the bus stop to meet a school age child and they played *I Spy* while they waited. This parent also noted that

she had played this game before participating in the PRINTS Program but had never realized that it contributed to a foundation for literacy development.

Goals stated by other adults were more general. For example, an aunt who had participated stated that such activities were good for the child as they would teach the child to pay attention to words (*I Spy*) or it would prepare them for school (*Reading With Children*). When activities were initiated by the child, the parent operated from her (the parent) knowledge of what the activity was inclined to do. When the child initiated an activity with another adult (example, a grandmother), the grandmother felt that any kind of involvement with young children was good. They were learning how to take part in activities with others, how to be responsible.

FEEDBACK/CLOSURE: Only events in which the activity was completed were included within the 50 events noted. Of the 22 which were observed, 18 were brought to closure by a remark or action by the parent. For example, in the *Guess the Picture* activity, the parent said, "You are getting so good at this, I will have to try and find more challenging pictures." In the *Reading With Children* event, it was common for parents to ask the children what they liked best about the story they had read, followed by the child's responses. At the end of a *Slippery Worm* event, a parent said, "That was a great game (the child won). It's fun to see who gets to the top of the tail first." The *Matching Labels and Products*, and the *Alphabet House* activities were concluded by the parent initiating applause, joined by the child. Of the events not observed, the participants provided the following comments in response to how they ended the activity or what were the last things they did: told the child he/she had done well, told the child he/she had learned a lot, said things like "Good job!", "Good for you!". One half of the 28 responses for described events either just stopped, or the parent/adult made a general comment like, "That's it!", or "Let's put our stuff away".

EXAMPLES OF LITERACY EVENTS

Example #1

Event Name: Reading and Retelling Stories

Event Participants: Child and grandmother. Child initiated this event, "Gram, can we tell about a story we read?"

Time: Living room.

Place: Mid-morning. Gram had come by to visit and Mom took this opportunity to go to the store.

Activity/Materials: Child brought a story book to her Gram. Gram glanced through it and wondered if they could maybe find a shorter story. They would like to have it finished by the time Mom got back from the store. The child found a shorter book. Gram glanced through this and agreed it would be a good story. They talked about the author and illustrator, skimmed through the book, making an occasional comment about pictures. Then they read the book together with Gram saying most of the words. At times they stopped and talked about what was happening, about a picture, or the child was asked a question that related a happening in the story to real life. This time she focussed on having Brittany (her granddaughter) build images for the story. Sometimes she would try and get Brittany to draw a picture in her mind, to close her eyes and tell her what she saw from the story after they read certain parts. At times Gram would ask her if she were going to paint some of the items or objects (houses, clothes, etc.) in the story, what colours she would choose. She read up to the end and asked Brittany to make up the kind of ending she would like. Then she read the ending that was there and they talked about the ending she made up and the one the author had written. When the story was finished, Gram said that she would read it once more. After that she asked Brittany to think in her mind about the story and to tell her what she could remember.

Event Goal: There were a number of goals for this particular event. Gram was happy that the child had suggested it as it would keep them meaningfully involved while Mom was at the store. She understood, from her conversations and observations with Mom that it was good to get children involved in reading stories and especially retelling stories would give good practice for when Brittany went to school. Gram really wanted Brittany to understand the story so that it would be easier to retell it.

Feedback/Closure: Gram made a point of praising Brittany for how well she remembered things. She told her she painted beautiful pictures in her mind. They had just finished the activity when Mom arrived from the store.

Example #2

Event Name: Picking out letters from flyers to match with food items.

Event Participants: Parent and child. The parent initiated this event. She placed a number of food items, tins, packages, vegetables on old newspaper on the kitchen floor. Then she laid out bristol board, markers, glue, a number of flyers, etc. As the child was watching, she said, "Brad, do you want to help Mommy find letters that go with these groceries?" The child agreed.

Time: Saturday afternoon.

Place: Kitchen floor.

Activity/Materials: The parent began by asking the child to name each of the items. The child was able to do this for all with the exception of "onions" which the parent then named for him. The parent praised the child for each of his responses. When onions were introduced Mom said, "To try and remember that these are onions, think how they smell." The child sniffed and said "Yuk!" The parent then said they were going to find a letter in the flyers that began the same as the name of the items. She took a carton of milk from the items that were off to the side and placed it between her and the child. She asked the child if he could find the name "Milk". The child was not able to so she guided him to the word. She then talked about the first letter, pointed to it, said it was "M" and made the sound for "M" and then blended the sound with the word "Milk" - "/m/-milk" Then she asked the child to look at a flyer with her and see if they could find another letter like "M". The child recognized the letter "M" in the word "Monday". The parent cut it out while she asked the child to cut out a piece bristol board which she had marked with a pencil. Then she asked the child to get the glue and put some on the back of the letter when they then put on the bristol board. Next they glued this letter to the carton of milk just below the word "milk". She then pointed to the letter and they said it, and then said the word "Milk". This procedure continued with the other items. For the vegetable items, when the letter was

glued on a piece of bristol board, the bristol board was pinned to the wrapping of the vegetable. All vegetables that were not already in wrapping, like the onions, had been put in bags for this purpose.

Event Goal: The parent felt this would be a very helpful activity for Brad to know the letter names and to realize that words begin with a certain sound. She thought that by using common household items that the activity would be more meaningful to the child.

Feedback/Closure: "That was a great job!"
The last item that they had made a letter for was a package of custard. At the end, the parent said, "I have a surprise. One of the groceries we found a letter for we are now going to eat some." Then she got a dish of custard for Brad and herself from the fridge.

Summary

The notion of a literacy event as described by Barton and Hamilton (1998) was validated in this study. Fifty such occurrences were identified either through observation by the researchers or described by the participants. There was no attempt to continue counting events beyond the first fifty identified. As might be expected, most of the events centered around activities from the PRINTS Program. However, parents added some from their own experience and a few occurred spontaneously. What is interesting is that in many instances, there were other participants in addition to a parent, sometimes with the parent and sometimes alone with the child. There was no particular time or place when the events took place. This validated statements made by the parents during the interviews that anytime is a time for literacy development. Goals for the events were usually more specific when stated by parents, usually in relation to the nature of the central activity; goals by adults other than the parents were usually of a more general nature, such as helping the child do better when he/she went to school. In most cases, closure was brought to the event, often involving a positive statement about the child's participation.

The identification and description of literacy events point out the importance of seeing literacy within a totality. Literacy activities just do not happen in isolation. By understanding a literacy activity as an event, it is then necessary to consider the other

factors that contribute to the success or otherwise of a literacy activity. The time and place where an event happens, the people involved, how the event began, what materials were used, the nature of the activity, and how it was brought to a close are all key in understanding family literacy activities.

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. London: Routledge, 1998

Transfer of Learning in Parent-Focussed
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