



When mama can't read: Counteracting intergenerational illiteracy

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American Idol star Fantasia Barrino recently wrote a memoir titled *Life Is Not a Fairy Tale* (2005) in which she related her struggles as a functionally illiterate mother struggling to read simple texts to her 4-year-old daughter. Fantasia was like the 44 million U.S. adults who do not have adequate reading skills to fill out a job application, read a food label, or read a story to a child. These individuals often lack the literacy skills needed to find and keep decent jobs, support their children's education, or participate actively in civic life (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). In this column, I offer some research-proven answers to a very basic question facing many urban reading teachers: What can a mother with limited literacy skills do to support and enhance the literacy development of her children? First, I review recent research on the causes of intergenerational illiteracy before turning attention to several evidence-based practices.

Factors contributing to intergenerational illiteracy

I define *intergenerational illiteracy* as a socio-cultural phenomenon whereby illiterate parents inadvertently sponsor home conditions that may seriously hinder their children's reading and writing development, thus perpetuating a cycle of illiteracy. Intergenerational illiteracy often exists in high-poverty urban and rural settings where it is common for teachers to find that three or more generations of a family have low literacy skills. Contributing factors in many homes are a lack of strong language examples, little child-parent in-

teraction, and lack of quality print materials. This phenomenon is not surprising, given the realities of the semiliterate and working poor. Many poor people in the United States must hold several minimum-wage jobs, which rob them of valuable time with their children. They may also hold culturally supported beliefs about leaving school to support their families and lack access to services such as quality preschools.

One strategy often attempted in large, poor urban or rural school districts is to try to bring illiterate or semiliterate parents to functional literacy in time to help their own children. These efforts can be as daunting as they are admirable. In a 1991 article "Why Johnny's Dad Can't Read," Bishop shed light on this formidable task by citing the U.S. Department of Education's finding that 50–75% of the 3 million adults annually enrolled in literacy programs drop out within the first month. There are many reasons why this intuitive but unsuccessful strategy often fails. Given the realities of the semiliterate and working poor—job requirements, cultural beliefs, time pressures, lack of financial resources, paucity of services, and travel constraints—it's unlikely that all parents or primary caregivers can help their children use the reading strategies commonly recommended.

Teenage parents also have well-known difficulties helping their children gain language and literacy skills. Teenage mothers as a group tend to provide less oral language stimulation than do older mothers, and their children are at greater risk of school failure (Burgess, 2005). This subgroup of parents needs significant support and education if its members are to positively affect their children's literacy skills.

Research informs us that children of parents living at the poverty level typically have fewer words spoken to them in their homes. Specifically, less educated, lower income parents talk even less and use fewer differentiated words than do those in other socioeconomic classes (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). Increasing the number of words spoken by parents as they interact with their children is a powerful family literacy tool, and it's one I discuss later.

Strategies to help mothers

Contrary to what some may think, intergenerational illiteracy is not a matter of choice but a predicament. If we believe that “literacy is the gateway to social justice and opportunity,” what can urban reading teachers do to help these struggling mothers succeed in helping their children become strong readers?

Emphasize strengths

Teachers must help illiterate mothers find ways they can use the skills they do possess, other funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992), to become successful “home literacy teachers.” Does this seem unrealistic? Research by Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair (1999) found that parents’ educational levels, literacy abilities, and language proficiency were not factors in their ability to support their children’s reading development. There are clear, effective, and relatively simple ways reading teachers can assist illiterate parents in building their child’s future literacy that are not dependent on their own reading abilities. Literacy educators should concentrate on what parents *can* do within their sociocultural contexts as much as they do with children in reading instruction; they should emphasize their strengths as literacy partners.

Promote dialogic reading

One of the most powerful and promising strategies is called *dialogic reading*. Often thought of as simple picture book reading, dialogic reading has a much different face. In this strategy, the child directs and leads a conversation around the pictures of a book; the parent listens to the child talk, uses “what” questions, and rephrases and extends the child’s

utterances, but remains at all times the follower in the dialogue (American Library Association, 2005). It is recommended that the text be read first to the child, but it is not the critical element in dialogic reading. Picture book dialogic reading seems to have the best result in improving the length of children’s sentences (Whitehurst, Falco, & Lonigan, 1988). Vocabulary becomes more complex and expressive as well. Sometimes just adding gestures is a valuable hint. Mothers who pointed as they talked established joint attention and helped children learn object names (Tomasello & Farrar, 1986).

Parents with limited English literacy skills can easily partner with their child in dialogic reading using the book as a tool. Parents can be helped by teachers to learn how to engage their child in this child-led dialogue. The American Library Association, for instance, hosts parent training sessions and can help teachers locate trainers in their Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library program. (For more information, see their website www.ala.org.)

Some of the original dialogic reading research was done by Whitehurst et al. (1988) and replicated many times in ensuing years, producing results that are educationally, linguistically, and statistically significant (Huebner, 2001; Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst, Arnold, & Epstein, 1994). Huebner (2000), however, found that parents must be *taught* to use a book in this language-rich manner; parents without training typically demonstrated a more traditional storytime routine with their children. In her opinion, this situation can lead to increased efforts by parents to read to their children at home, but the quality or nature of the reading does not change.

Increase mean length of utterance

The mother’s “mean length of utterance” (MLU), or roughly the average number of words spoken together, is predictive of a young child’s later language development (Murray, 1990). When parents speak in longer word chains—more complex sentences—children tend to imitate and create longer sentences as well.

Research on increasing a child’s MLU provides some valuable insights for teachers who are coaching semiliterate or illiterate parents.

- Parents who speak or question using complete sentences are more likely to have children who respond in longer word chains and utterances (Peterson, Carta, & Greenwood, 2005).
- Parents who read or talk through books that are narrative and manipulative—ones children can touch, pull, or handle—can increase their children’s questions and the length and number of utterances (Kaderavek & Justice, 2005).

Simply giving children models and opportunities to lengthen and elaborate sentences significantly increases their oral language ability and fosters reading development (Farrar, 1985; Remaly, 1990).

Strategies to help low-income parents

In the rest of this column, I highlight several evidence-based strategies proven highly effective in increasing language development with parents in low-income urban settings.

Talk and play

Many researchers concede that the size of a child’s vocabulary is a strong predictor of school success (“Playing With Words,” 2005). When parents set aside time to talk to their children there can be a long-term positive effect on academic literacy development. Other researchers studying low-income parents at play with their children have found that supportive play involving mothers *and* fathers increases positive language gains in their children (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004).

Peterson, Jesso, and McCabe (1999) found that simply encouraging low-income parents to talk to their children at length every day—having the children tell their own personal narratives to their parents—significantly increased the children’s vocabulary. The children of the mothers who used complex vocabulary also used more complex words and sentence structures (Weizman & Snow, 2001). Some teachers refer to such words as “big

fat words” and urge parents to use them when speaking to their children.

Toys can serve as a literacy and language boost as well. In their research, Stalnaker and Craghead (1982) found that children retelling a story had the longest verbal responses (i.e., MLU), but interactions using toys produced more spontaneous utterances. One creative kindergarten teacher I know asked parents to do a weekly family Show and Tell—a longtime favorite of small children. The children practiced Show and Tell at home and then repeated the exercise at school using the same object. The teacher noted that the children talked more comfortably in front of the class and seemed to use more complex and novel words in description when they prepared at home.

Many researchers have found that merely urging mothers or fathers to spend time talking with their child (i.e., responding and expanding on what the child says) can significantly increase their child’s number and use of words (Fewell & Deutscher, 2004; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991; Tenebaum, Snow, Roach, & Kurland, 2005). Fewell and Deutscher (2002), in working with premature babies and their families, discovered that verbally and socially responsive mothers enhance children’s receptive language (i.e., listening vocabulary) in ways that have a far-reaching effect on later verbal and reading development. Another study by Hoff-Ginsberg (1991) added the concept of language interactions to the language development equation. This researcher learned that even though talking to one’s child often has a positive language impact, spending time interacting with a child is at least as important as the quality of the speech they share. Therefore, when mothers and fathers increase two-way conversations with their young children, there can be major benefits in language development and later reading development.

Make-believe-alouds

Reading aloud to children is one of the most common recommendations that literacy experts and agencies make as a preparation for academic success. But if mama can’t read, consider reframing read-alouds as simple make-believe-alouds. A parent does not have to know words on the page to construct a fanciful story about the pictures, nor

does storytelling about a picture book have to be exactly the same for each retelling. A teacher, parent, or literacy guide can easily demonstrate a variety of ways to share any book without having any knowledge of the words included.

One creative teacher I know used a book written in German (not a language she could read) to illustrate the point. She moved through the book page by page, created a wildly imaginative tale that captivated her young audience, and ended amidst shouts of “Again!” Every family has a treasure trove of imaginative stories that they can adapt to picture books and make a story come alive. Morgan and Goldstein (2004) found that teaching low-socioeconomic-status mothers to use a storybook fancifully and imaginatively with their young children increased the type and quality of language in child–parent interactions.

Magazines, comics, and catalogs

When books are not readily available in the home, many families have access to magazines, comics, or catalogs. Simply engaging children in conversations using this variety of texts and pictures can stimulate language, vocabulary, and storytelling. One mother I know plays the Million Dollars game with her children using assorted catalogs. She asks her children to search through the catalogs to find what they would buy if they won a million dollars. A kindergarten teacher borrowed this idea from the family and brought catalogs in to create a catalog center. She believes it is the most talkative, noisy, and engaging center in her classroom.

How teachers can help

There is much a proactive teacher can do to help illiterate urban mothers help their children become successful readers. Here’s further evidence. In one study done by Miller (1978), parents were given direct instruction in methods like the ones described in this column that were designed to increase their child’s speech, language, and utterance length. The parents became avid partners and used the methodologies to enhance their child’s language skills. The following are some suggestions derived from the research cited in this column for you to use with mothers who can’t read.

- Build on what the mother *can* do—talk.
- Value what she knows, how she lives, and the uniqueness of her family.
- Teach her to use books to make up stories for her children.
- Urge her to have her own Show-and-Tell times at home.
- Teach her to use dialogic reading techniques with her children.
- Teach her to choose books that engage and can be manipulated with her child.
- Teach her that speaking in long sentences models strong language for her child.
- Teach her to be responsive to her child’s speech and language—to spend time in language activities.
- Teach her how to combine language and play.
- Teach her to use complex or uncommon words when she talks to her child.
- Urge her to tell her child family stories, songs, and rituals.
- Have her point as she talks with her child about objects in the environment.
- Teach her that just by talking and listening she can help her child to be a reader.

With this mindset and plan, we can respect the mother who can’t read as her child’s first and best teacher.

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