

# Reading Their Worlds

## Working with Diverse Families to Enhance Children's Early Literacy Development



Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world.

— Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo

Rosario Ordoñez-Jasis  
and Robert W. Ortiz

**SUCCESSFUL, CULTURALLY ENRICHED, AND LINGUISTICALLY SENSITIVE** family literacy programs incorporate families' life experiences, ways of knowing, educational needs and resources, and goals. Alma Flor Ada (2003) reminds us that "students live in two worlds: home and school. If these two worlds do not recognize, understand, and respect each other, students are put in a difficult predicament" and very little learning can take place (p. 11). As educators working with early childhood educators who want to develop family literacy programs for culturally and linguistically diverse families, we discuss the need for respectful partnerships that build on the strengths of parents and other family members. We encourage educators to begin meaningful two-way conversations that will enable them to read the world of their young students and their families.

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A sociocultural perspective of literacy considers the way parents, children, and extended-family members use literacy at home and in their community. These activities may be initiated by a parent or a child, or they may occur spontaneously as families go about the business of their daily lives. Family literacy programs are usually initiated by outside educational institutions or agencies. The programs are encouraged to build on home literacy practices while supporting the learning and development of school-like literacy behaviors of parents, children, and families (Morrow, Paratore, & Tracey 1994).

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire states that learning to read the written word is intertwined with the knowledge and meaning that is derived from reading one's world (Freire & Macedo 1987). Reading the world, according to Freire, includes understanding how our lives are shaped by complex and multifaceted sociocultural factors—our cultural identity, family history, employment, education, community, and long-term (individual and collective) goals and dreams (Compton-Lily 2003). These emerging understandings influence how we interpret and interact with text, which in turn greatly influences how we learn to reread or decode our worlds and everyday realities.

When creating comprehensive and culturally relevant family literacy programs, educators need to try to read

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worlds of the children they teach and their families. As teachers talk with families in order to understand their lives outside of school, not only do they gain a better sense of families' sociocultural contexts, but they also validate a wealth of stories, dispositions, motivations, and cultural information or "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Gonzalez 2004) that become the building blocks for a comprehensive family literacy program.

### **Beyond a deficit paradigm**

The importance of parent involvement in children's education is well documented. Family involvement is associated with children's higher test scores, better attendance and behavior, and stronger cognitive skills (Darling 1992). Research on parent involvement in early literacy development shows that early reading experiences prepare children for the benefits of formal literacy instruction and build a foundation for later reading success (Burns, Griffin, & Snow 1999).

Auerbach (1995) argues that current approaches to family literacy programs, particularly those targeted toward families with low incomes and families from diverse cultural backgrounds, tend to take a neodeficit approach. That is, despite the recent discourse on the need to build on family strengths (Nieto 2002; Riojas-Cortez, Flores, & Clark 2003), many educational programs fail to fully recognize, incorporate, or tap into the wealth of literacy information, skills, and knowledge parents may hold. Despite evidence to the contrary (Moll & Gonzalez 2004; Ordoñez-

Jasis & Jasis 2004; Ortiz 1998), culturally and linguistically diverse parents are too often viewed as not supporting their children's school success (Darling 1992; Volk & Long 2005). In addition, the ways in which such families involve themselves in their children's schooling often go unrecognized by school staff (Lareau 1994).

Parent early literacy involvement calls for a renewed understanding and acknowledgment of the depth and diversity of home-based knowledge as children begin to acquire formal literacy skills (Darling 1992; Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis 2005; Volk & Long 2005). Many culturally and linguistically diverse parents value literacy and see it as the single most powerful hope for their children's future (Flores, Cousin, & Diaz 1998; Nieto 2002).

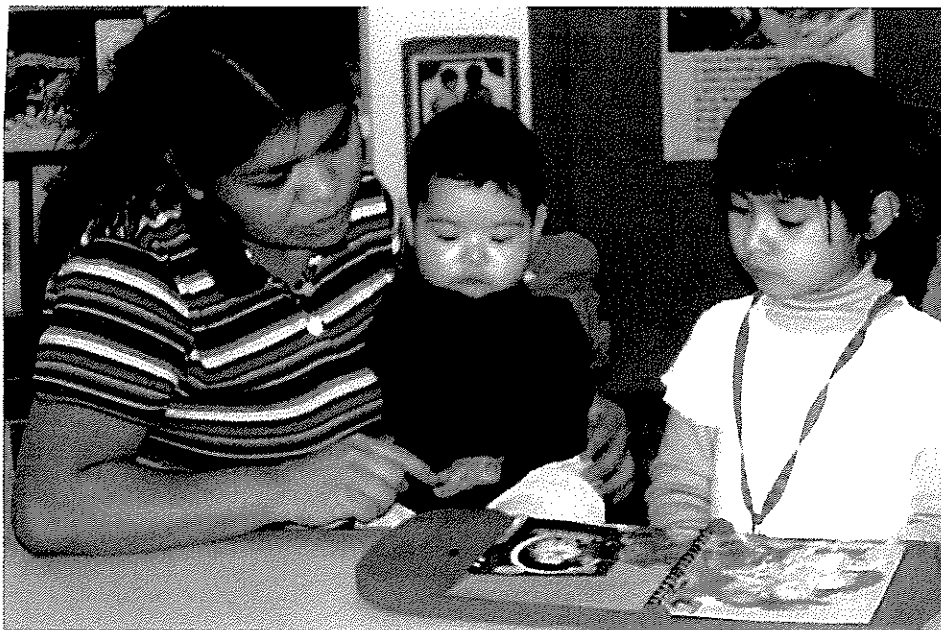
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### **Basics for a Family Survey**

These questions may serve as a starting point in developing family literacy curricula based on family members' background information:

- If recently arrived in the United States, what is the family's country of origin?
- In what language do the adult family members prefer to read?
- What interests does the family have?
- What types of reading material do both parents enjoy?
- How comfortable are the parents and other family members in reading to the children?
- What are their goals for sharing literacy activities with their children?

Teachers may need the assistance of an interpreter for families who are learning English. They can use the information collected to incorporate fun, interesting, and meaningful reading activities in home and school experiences.



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## **Recommendations for family literacy initiatives**

Early childhood educators can have a greater impact on children's literacy development when they view parents as providers of information as well as recipients. As teachers begin to embrace both the words and the worlds of parents, they learn to assist and broaden the role of families in their children's literacy learning and establish home-school relationships based on mutual respect and trust.

To promote culturally sensitive family literacy programs, we offer the following recommendations.

### **Reflect on individual and program views about family involvement.**

Although educators say they support parent involvement, the approach to family literacy used by many schools and individual teachers is based on deficit assumptions that marginalize parent voices and efforts (Darling 1992; Lareau 1994). For example, many programs choose books that reflect mainstream values and lifestyles rather than considering families' cultures. Staff's in-depth discussions and examination of a program's family involvement policies are an important first step toward improving the program's efforts (Ada, Campoy, & Zubizarreta 2001). During this process, teachers should also reflect individually on their own personal dispositions and their assumptions and expectations about the involvement of parents from minority groups, in particular. For example, Flores, Cousin, and Diaz describe the need for educators to identify what they refer to as "habitually

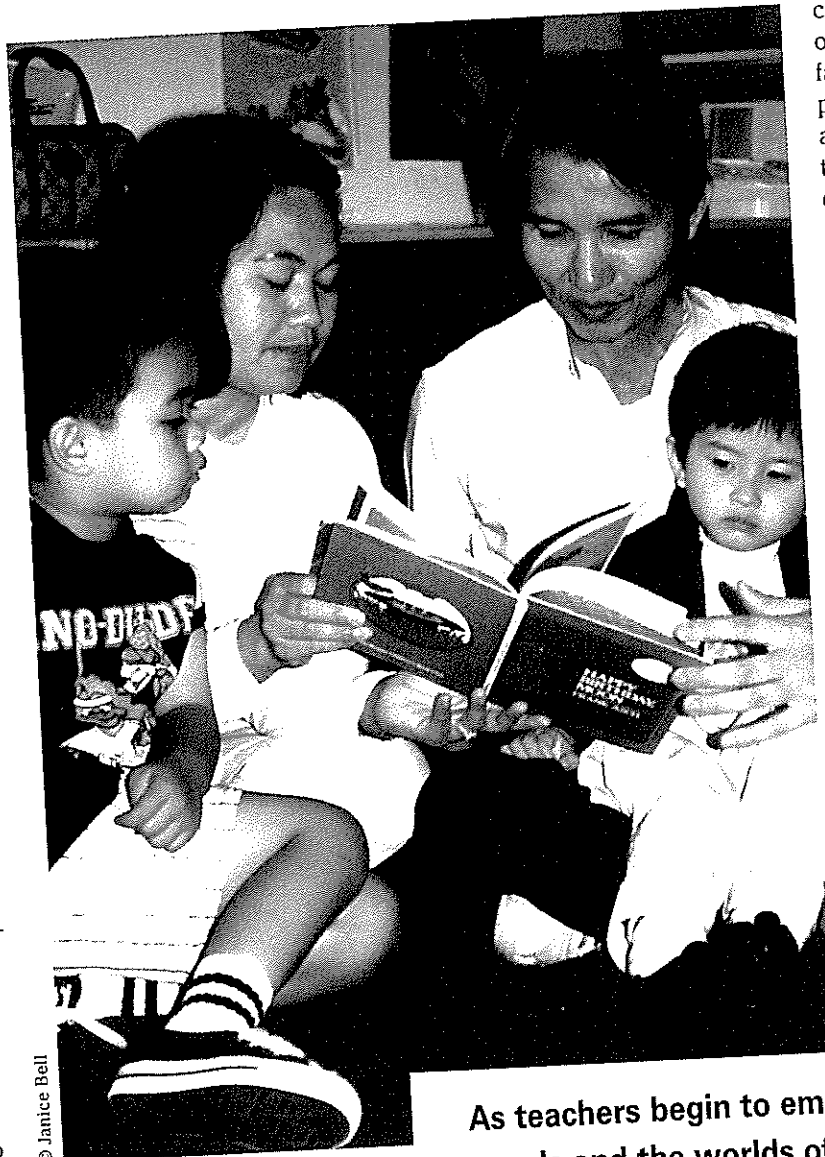
unexamined attitudes" (1998, 27) that consciously and unconsciously impact how we interact with diverse children and their families. With these renewed understandings, educators can outline their program's goals and content related to family literacy agendas, objectively assess the program's strengths and weaknesses, and make the necessary changes.

### **Ask both parents to share information about their literacy backgrounds.**

Family surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, and home observations can provide a wealth of information about family situations and parent perceptions and expectations of the functions of literacy in their lives (see "Basics for a Family Survey," p. 45).

### **Offer diverse reading material.**

Families tend to choose reading material that is interesting, helpful, and important to them. Try to include authentic multicultural literature that reflects the rich, diverse realities of families. The following themes are relevant to many families: preserving tradition, celebrating the richness of culture and family life, telling one's personal story, telling stories of people who share similar experiences,



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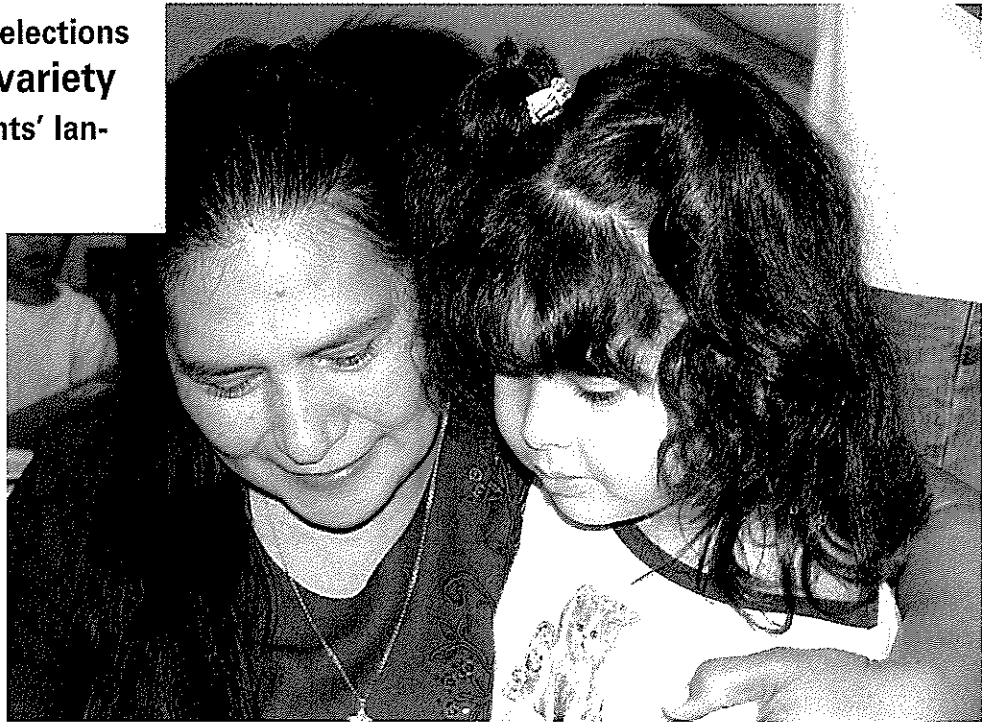
**When sharing literary selections with families, offer a variety of genres in the parents' language of preference.**

and addressing social issues and concerns (Ada 2003). When sharing literary selections with families, educators should offer a variety of genres: poetry, drama, biography, autobiography, history, and contemporary fiction and fantasy in the parents' language of preference. Literature should also reflect the culture of the family, thus supporting the idea that their ethnic background is respected and an integral part of the children's learning process (Nieto 2002; Moll & Gonzalez 2004; Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis 2005). Parents can help schools identify appropriate reading materials while educators, in turn, can seek out texts to share with parents.

**Use the parents' primary language.**

"Language is one of the strongest elements in one's self-definition as an individual and a social being" (Ada 2003, 7). Paying attention to the home language raises it to a place of dignity and respect while allowing parents to show their reading and writing skills in the language they feel most comfortable using. Although some parents may lack the English skills needed for high-level conversations and preliteracy activities, many have a rich home language foundation to support critical parent-child interactions (Tabors & Snow 2002).

Provide children's reading material in the family's home language and encourage adults to read to their children in that language. When appropriate, send home translated materials for special events, such as invitations for workshops, event reminders, preworkshop interest surveys, and program descriptions. Conduct parent workshops and conferences in the parents' primary language. Studies reveal the many positive outcomes of using families' primary languages in family literacy workshops (Delgado-Gaitan 1990; Riojas-Cortez, Flores, & Clark 2003; Moll & Gonzalez 2004). When this is not possible, provide a translator, drawing upon the rich linguistic resources of potential parent liaisons within schools.



**Consider the role of parents who are not able to read or write.**

Parents who cannot read or write fluently in either their primary language or in English still play a critical role in their child's literacy learning. Communicate to all parents the importance of oral language, because it is a strong precursor to early literacy development (Burns, Griffin, & Snow 1999). Children's dramatic and creative expressions are enhanced when parents engage children in rhymes, songs, riddles, oral history, poetry, proverbs, and folklore (Ada 2003).

Educators can encourage all parents to engage their children in enriching dialogue and language play. Through storytelling, for example, parents can create their own story with a beginning, middle, and end. This helps prepare children to understand the complex components of literacy, such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and comprehension (Isbell 2002), as well as literary features such as motive for action, author/audience relationships, and the cultural definitions of a good story (Craig et al. 2001).

Teachers can model how to use wordless picture books to teach children important early literacy skills such as predicting, story sequencing, concepts of print, describing details within illustrations, and identifying key story elements or main characters. Wordless picture books are excellent tools for helping children and parents appreciate the aesthetic pleasures of books while developing creativity and imagination.

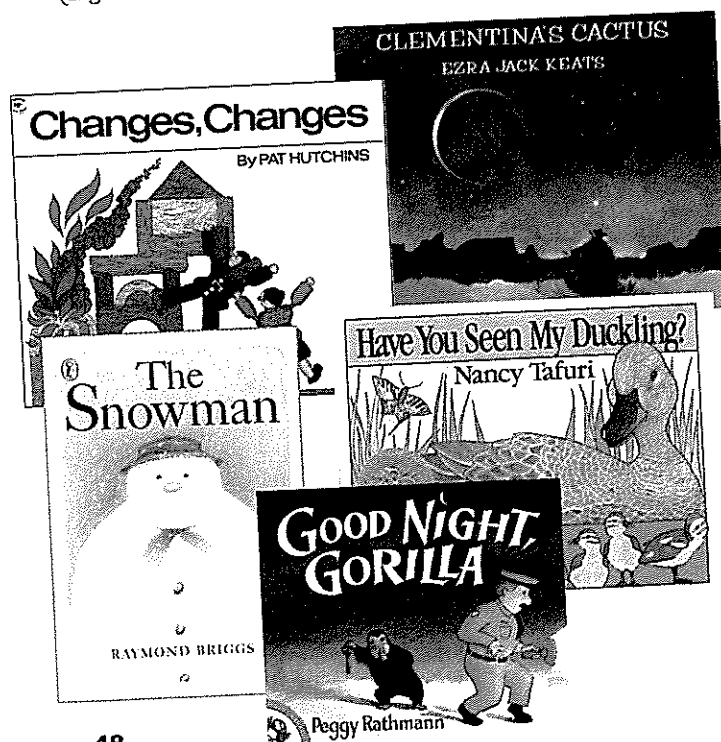
### Offer a variety of approaches to connect with parents.

For numerous reasons, some parents may not involve themselves in their children's schooling (Lareau 1994; Burningham & Dever 2005). Some parents may work two or more jobs, making it difficult for them to attend school functions. Others may rely on public transportation. Recent immigrant parents may be hesitant to attend school activities because they are unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system, or they may feel that they do not understand or speak English well enough to talk with their child's teacher. Other parents may have had negative experiences when they themselves were students in U.S. schools and consequently distrust school officials. For parents such as these, it is particularly important to create common ground and avoid making negative assumptions about their educational values and expectations (Nieto 2002).

Teachers can attempt a variety of approaches to connect with parents. They should be flexible in scheduling and vary the times when workshops are offered throughout the year. They can consider providing child care services for parents who would not otherwise be able to attend.

### Tailor the program for families with children who have special needs.

For parents whose children have special needs, it is important to pay attention to the child's learning needs and how they affect the acquisition of specific reading and writing skills, such as letter recognition, word comprehension, and pronunciation. Children with disabilities face great risks in relation to literacy development when their parents hold low expectations for the children's success (Light & Kelford-Smith 1993).



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It is recommended that school personnel collaborate with parents and plan ways to foster children's literacy learning. Although academic learning concerns are addressed during Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings at the school, staff should encourage parents to meet with teachers during the school year and also to learn about strategies they can use at home to support their children's reading and writing skills. Educators should provide information for families on ways to minimize the effects of the disability on the child's development while at the same time building a positive parent-child relationship. With a full understanding of the impact of a disability on the learning process, parent involvement can be a meaningful experience—for both parent and child.

### Envision literacy as a means to empower families.

There is a critical link between literacy, self-development, and empowerment, because literacy enables transformative thought and social action (Freire & Macedo 1987; Volk & Long 2005). Delgado-Gaitan's (1990) and Jasis's (2000) research with Latino families, for example, shows how schools and literacy programs can play a role in establishing parent networks that can make decisions that improve schooling. Literacy as a social and transformative act can help families—both individually and collectively—understand and change their social conditions (Delgado-Gaitan 1990). Parent training sessions can begin with a safe space: a place to reflect and share stories of triumphs, frustrations, and lessons learned about their literacy experiences as children and adults both in and out

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of school. This practice can help build a community of learners. It establishes common ground whereby parents develop agency and gain the confidence to coconstruct new learning-based literacy activities with their children (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis 2005).

## Conclusion

Family literacy programs can lead to long-lasting, positive results when they encourage parents and other family members to reflect critically on their relationships with their children and to think about the role of literacy in their lives. As parents increase their sense of belonging and responsibility, and possibly learn to reread their world in new and exciting ways (Freire & Macedo 1987), they can begin to share in the empowering experience of creating a better place for their children via literacy activities.

Parent involvement in children's early literacy experiences can enhance children's academic achievement. And while families differ in their experiences and literacy practices, as well as in their understanding of learning processes, reading and doing related activities together seem to strengthen children's abilities to decode and interpret their world. Through early exposure to literacy practices, children become increasingly equipped to enter a literary world that is filled with wonder and adventure.

Many parents engage in daily literacy activities with their children, although they may not be fully aware of the educational impact of their involvement. But when mothers, fathers, and other family members share print and text with a child, they can become valuable resources and meaning makers in their children's lives. Culturally enriched and linguistically sensitive family literacy programs can strengthen and expand these powerful parent-child dynamics. Family literacy programs and initiatives have a greater chance of long-term success and effectiveness when they tap into families' readings of the world around them (Moll & Gonzalez 2004). When dialogue and interaction between home and school are based on a more equal exchange of knowledge, it leads to an appreciation for and understanding of each by the other. Society and schools are enriched by the diversity produced through this interactive dialogue.



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