

# The Senglea Family Literacy Programme

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“The Programme offered literacy teaching for children while improving the parents’ ability to help their children with literacy”

The National Literacy Survey of the Reading Attainment of Year 2 Pupils carried out by the Literacy Unit in March 1999 (Mifsud, Milton, Brooks & Hutchison, 2000) highlighted many interesting findings. Amongst these was the difference in attainment on both the Maltese and English tests by pupils coming from families of different socio-economic backgrounds and different regions in Malta. Thus, to act upon recommendations posited in the light of such findings, the Senglea Primary School and the Senglea School Council took the initiative of contacting the Literacy Unit of the University of Malta requesting it to implement a Family Literacy Programme.

The Family Literacy Programme studied here was ‘two-generation, two-pronged’ instead of ‘three-pronged’ as the programme did not include adult basic education for the parents. The Programme offered literacy teaching for children while improving the parents’ ability to help their children with literacy. Thus, the main focus was the children and their literacy. Since the Programme was relatively short it was not possible to focus on the parents’ literacy as well.

The Family Literacy Programme aimed to build on existing family literacy practices in the home as well as extending them (Auerbach, 1989; Taylor, 1983). In order to extend these literacy practices in the home the parents learnt how to use different reading techniques, how to read with their children, and also how to encourage and motivate them to enjoy reading.

The Programme sought to be sensitive to the needs of the families and to respect their different social, cultural, and educational backgrounds (Morrow, 1995; Heath, 1983;

Auerbach, 1989; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). This was achieved by obtaining as much information as possible about the families. Also throughout the programme informal discussions were held with the participants to ensure they felt at ease and to communicate their needs to the Literacy Team.

The programme adopted a parallel approach; sessions run for parents and separate sessions run for children. However, a very important feature of the Programme was that a few sessions or parts of sessions involved both the children and parents working together.

## Main Aims

The main aims of the Senglea Family Literacy Programme for the children were as follows:

- to improve the children’s literacy skills in both Maltese and English;
- to enhance their enjoyment of reading;
- to encourage their participation in other literacy related activities at home and at school;
- to involve the children in literacy activities which should be viewed as a source of enjoyment and pleasure.

The main aims of the Senglea Family Literacy Programme for the parents were:

- to enable parents to be in a better position to help their children with literacy skills;

**Parents learning how to make a mind-map to use with their children to plan study sessions**



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**Children 'fishing' for parts of sentences**

“It was important for participants to be actively involved through discussion, role-play and other related activities”

**Children enjoying a literacy board game under the guidance of a tutor**



- to encourage parents to share, or start sharing, literacy-related activities with their children;
- to create awareness of the importance of a literacy-rich environment in the home as well as outside the home;
- to enhance and foster a positive attitude towards reading and other literacy-related activities in the parent;
- to create the awareness that literacy starts at home and that many activities they engage in at home with their child/ren are related to literacy;
- to raise awareness about the fact that as parents they play a key role in their child's literacy development.

## A Description of the Senglea Family Literacy Programme

The Family Literacy Programme was structured over a series of 8 sessions of 2 hours each spread over an 8-week period between the 16th of May to the 4th of July 2000.

The sessions were held at the Senglea Primary School as this was a convenient venue for all the participants who live in Senglea. The Programme was voluntary and was not of a 'restricted' nature (Hannon, 1999) to give an equal opportunity to families who wished

to participate. At the very beginning of the Family Literacy Programme the content of the parents' and children's sessions was discussed with the parents to ensure that the parents were involved in the sessions as valued partners.

The parents' sessions focused primarily on how they could help their children with their literacy development. Therefore, the sessions highlighted and created awareness of literacy in the environment (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). An important aspect of the Programme was that it was important for participants to be actively involved through discussion, role-play and other related activities. For most of the parents this was a novel experience. Despite the fact that some parents showed a certain degree of self-consciousness at first, they soon came to feel at ease with each other and were happy to participate fully in this aspect of the Programme.

## The parents' sessions

These sessions were led by two tutors and expounded on the subject areas below:

- We live in a print-rich environment and we are dealing with this print which is around us all the time (eg: logos, street names, traffic signs, names of shops, recipes, banners, time-tables, instructions, prayers on holy pictures, newspapers.);
- Ways of reading books with their child/ren using different techniques and strategies like paired or shared reading;
- How to choose books for (or with) children that are interesting, enjoyable and of the appropriate level of difficulty;
- Guidelines about what to do or not to do while reading with their children were also discussed and the parents themselves were involved in a roleplay as parent and child. Issues discussed included the importance of giving the child positive feedback and encouragement while reading, talking about the pictures and not only reading the text and of eliminating competing stimuli such as television and radio while reading;
- How to help their child with studying and revision. Preparing schedules and mind-maps of what to study including the time-frame and specific topics or subjects. Planning for free time and breaks in between study sessions was also discussed.

## The children's sessions

The children's sessions were led by five literacy tutors and included many different literacy activities. A lot of thought and careful planning was put into

the sessions to make sure they were enjoyable and significant learning experiences for the children. The team's aim was to change the attitude towards reading of those children who were not very keen on reading. The purpose of the exercise was to motivate them to read and to improve their reading habits/



**Parents and children during a shared reading activity**

“The Family Literacy Programme was successful in instilling a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence in the parents and children”

behaviours. Thus, the team always took a big box with a quality selection of Maltese and English books to the sessions for the children to borrow and to read at home or even during part of the session if they so wanted. The children would start the sessions in small groups where they would tell the other children what the book they had borrowed was about and whether they had enjoyed reading it.

The children would then have different literacy activities (such as reading and discussing books, board games, writing activities) in small groups or a story-telling session as a whole group.

### The Joint Sessions

During the joint sessions (or parts of sessions) the parents and children practised reading strategies and techniques discussed in other sessions while the tutors observed and were ready to assist if necessary. After the activity the tutors would usually give feedback upon what had been observed.

One of the joint sessions involved book-making. Each parent and child was to write a story and prepare a book. Samples and models of different types of books that could be produced were presented to the parents and children by the tutors to provide them with a variety of different ideas. The parents and children were to think about a book and story at home and continue with the book-making process during the next session. Some actually turned up for the next session with the finished book! The books and ideas they came up with were very creative and involved many hours of work. Many participants also involved other members of the family who were good at drawing or who were just interested and wanted to be involved. Since this was what the team thought would happen, it had prepared other activities for the session. However, those who had finalised their book were quite happy to help those who were still working on theirs.

Another joint session involved the parents and children in making hand puppets out of

paper bags. They really enjoyed creating their own characters. When the puppets were finished they prepared short scripts and created puppet shows in small groups.

## Evaluation of the Programme

The evaluation of the Programme draws on multiple sources of evidence derived from the different participants involved. A thorough evaluation through the parents', children's and tutors' questionnaires and the parents' interviews was undertaken. This evaluation would enable the amelioration of the Programme through identifying the strong aspects of the practice of implementing family literacy processes and detecting and improving the weaker aspects of the Programme.

## Outcomes

The Family Literacy Programme was successful in instilling a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence in the parents and children. The Programme was also successful in challenging and changing the children's negative attitudes towards reading, as they became more positive: most of the children came to enjoy reading by the end of the Programme. They also started believing more in themselves as capable readers.

The parents also became more aware of their important role in their children's literacy development and learned how to assist the children with reading through employing different techniques such as paired- and shared-reading. They also learned how to read with, or to, their children and to set aside a special time to devote to reading. As a bonus effect two of the adult participants also improved their own literacy skills.

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