

# **Building Family Literacy Skills among Parents and Children in Developing Countries: An Impressionistic Account in Uganda**

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## **Abstract**

Building family literary skills among parents and children will enable them to access and use information for national development. The existing literature reviewed shows that the three common approaches of family literacy include: the family and social life, home-school relationships, and the use of libraries and readership development. A descriptive, case study research design based in Kampala district, Uganda was conducted in all five divisions of the district to assess and establish the best approach for enabling parents and children to acquire family literacy skills in Uganda. In addition, published and unpublished documents regarding the subject, including information on children, families, education, community development, library development, and literacy were reviewed. Although the family and social life, the parent, school and teacher relationship, and libraries and readership development have been adopted in Uganda, there is lack of information access skills to ensure that parents and children acquire sustainable lifelong learning. In order to integrate information skills in the development of family literacy, parents are obliged to assume a leading role in developing and promoting the child's social, educational and information needs. A family information literacy programme (FILP) will ensure that a child builds abilities of exploiting the available opportunities to access information for lifelong learning. The paper provides strategic directions for this programme that target increased access to information and books for parents and children to ensure the attainment of a literate and informed society.

## **Introduction**

Most of the things a modern human being enjoys in his/her everyday life have been invented or discovered through trial and error by our ancestors. Literacy too has evolved from medieval systems of writing, such as hieroglyphics invented by Egyptians using papyrus sheets, and cuneiform by the Babylonians characterised by writings on clay tablets. The meaning of literacy has evolved from a mere "ability to read and write" to include the ability to address the practices and outcomes of education in the information age (Barton, 2004: 2). Being literate in this sense means possession of a minimum capacity both to understand the moral implications and to act upon the demands of competence of what a particular society defines as responsible participation of a person in that society (Hillerich, 1993:10). In fact, Barton (2004:2) associates

literacy to a particular process by which available information can be more easily understood by a particular society.

Information literacy comprises a set of abilities that enable individuals to recognise when information is needed and the capacity to locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information (Council for Australian University Librarians, 2001:1). To develop any other literacy [like family literacy], information literacy is required as a tool for empowering individuals and societies to develop the abilities of learning how to learn. Learning how to learn requires a literate person to have the ability to recognise a need, and to locate, access, evaluate, organise, and effectively use information to satisfy that need (Barton, 2004:2). To utilise information, societies (e.g. families) need to be literate about the needs, roles and rights. According to Meyers and Jeeves ([Sa]: 36), the way one trains a child affects the way the child behaves within the environment. This question is based on parental duty as laid out in Proverbs 22:6, which says: “Train a child in the way he should grow, and when he is old he will not depart from it”. It is therefore important that families in developing countries refocus their approach to enable parents and children to acquire information literacy skills for lifelong learning.

## **Literature Review**

There are a number of approaches, including the family and social life, home-school relationships, the use of libraries and readership development that have been used globally in building family literacy.

### **Family and Social Life Approach**

The family and social life approach engages children to participate in domestic responsibilities such as cooking (Herbert, 1994:77). In this approach, “we are more interested in how the child develops his potential rather than how he does in relation to others” (Serwanga, 2001:21). This approach requires interaction between a parent and a child to contribute to the child’s development through storytelling. Accordingly, parents act as a role model to their children. As a result, children will develop the traits possessed by the parents within the society or environment. This approach is, however, based on informal learning and does not integrate the formal education programmes to enable children become lifelong learners.

### **Parent, Children and Teachers (PACT) Approach**

To develop family literacy in a home, there should be a friendly and co-operative relationship between the school and the home (Rukundo, 1999:21). This approach requires keeping parents well informed about their children's progress at school and child development progress at school (mental, physical, social and emotional). This enables the parent to monitor and participate in the child's language and reading activities, and speech and language development (Feinberg, 1946:54). In a sense, parents are potential 'co-teachers' and have responsibility towards a child both at home and at school, and offer informal teaching that respects societal ethics, morals, and spiritual values. In this approach, schools take parents as critical friends, advocates, and partners in the educational process.

Indeed, Hancock and Gale (1996:15), while referring to authors such as Bissex (1980) and Minns (1993), maintain that literacy embedded in the social process and cultural traditions of family life is more likely to be sustainable for the development of lifelong learning among children. The PACT approach enables parents and children to search for and read books together at school, which opens up an opportunity for closer home-school understanding. In fact, reporting on the progress of a family literacy project in South Africa, Machet and Pretorius (2004:45) state: "We have to help parents and caregivers who do not have high levels of literacy to use the books to ensure that children become lifetime readers".

### **Libraries and Readership Development**

Libraries play a role in the development of family literacy. They inculcate in children and parent the love for books and for literature, and encourage them to read and practise reading skills. For instance, in some religious societies, reading a Bible or other religious text is reported in the literature (Moon, 1998:6) to have exerted a significant influence on the development of information skills. The literacy approach of reading the Bible as a text is not only relevant to contemporary readers but also gives more attention to the linguistic and literary materials used (McKnight, 1985:10).

Readership development is about creating and supporting readers [users], widening people's horizons and helping them (Thebridge et al., 2001:25) to access information. Applying the Socratic method of teaching, Aristotle taught Alexander and other companions to look for facts and patterns among a variety of sources and integrate them in solving specific problems (Bose, 2003:41). Aristotle's teachings sparked in Alexander a deep interest in reading, which in turn influenced him to build Alexandria as a centre of art, culture and education (Bose, 2003:183) and

conceive the idea of creating the first public library and a museum in the area to serve the community. In fact, Ptolemy [Alexander's successor in Egypt] developed interest in reading and became determined to make Alexandria's dreams come true. Later Ptolemy III [grandson to Ptolemy] had the Torah translated into Greek to benefit the children of the Ptolemy family. In this approach, children become more interested and engaged with their environment if guided and encouraged to make real choices based on their individual needs.

The above approaches involve interactions between the children and parents, teachers and libraries without a defined programme for integrating information literacy skills in family literacy. A strategy to build information literacy skills among children and parents is therefore required.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on a descriptive case study research design (Busha and Harter, 1980:167, and Powell and Connaway, 2004:61). The study reviewed literature and documents that relate to children, families, education, community development, library development, and literacy. A field study was conducted in all five divisions of Kampala district to assess and establish the best approach for enabling parents and children to acquire family literacy skills. These divisions are Central, Kawempe, Makindye, Nakawa, and Rubaga. Kampala district was selected because of the social problems associated with most homes and families in cities, including inadequate accommodation and the busy schedules of parents in business and office work. Kampala district having been selected purposively, two parishes in each division and consequently one village for each parish were purposively selected. The families selected were those with both parents (mother and father), and at least a child. In Uganda, a child is defined as a person below 18 years (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2003:11). In total, 10 families were selected and studied, two from each division. One child was identified in a family as part of the study and his/her age and a class of study was also recorded. The fathers' age ranged from 34 to 52 years whereas the mothers' age ranged from 25 to 45.

The majority of the men had attained education to the level of a diploma (4), and fewer (2) had completed only primary education. The majority of the men were businessmen while the women were housewives. The age group of the children considered for the study ranged from four (for nursery) to 12 (for P6). From each family, the study attempted to establish the approaches used to enhance family literacy. The challenges met by families in attempting to acquire skills to

promote family literacy were established. Data was analysed based on the theme and the existing literature. For instance, to detect trends and patterns of data obtained from the study, the data was subjected to some systematisation and categorisation according to the themes of the content of this study (Slater, 1990:122). Information obtained from government documents, Acts and other legislations, and the statistics or census documents were utilised to analyse the data (Birley and Moreland, 1997:32). This called for sensitive interpretation of the information collected to communicate the findings in this paper.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Through interviews conducted and the documentary review made, data on the approaches to family literacy and their challenges was obtained.

### **Approaches to Family Literacy Activities in Uganda**

There have been attempts at parent-school interactions in some families. For instance, children bring their homework to parents for help. Parents also give guidelines on assignments given to the children at school. The government considers education to be a fundamental human right and has re-affirmed various international aspirations in its national development programmes. Some of these international aspirations include the World Declaration on Education for All, the World Summit for Children (1990), the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), the World Conference on Special Needs Education (1994), Forum on Education for All (1996), and the International Conference on Child Labour (1997). Most of these aspirations have declared the need for reducing illiteracy (UNESCO, 2001:27), which has placed education for all as a strategy for poverty eradication.

Parents are the pillars of family literacy and provide leadership to the entire family. A family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society. In Uganda (2003), a family is defined as a husband and wife and their children, if any. It is the duty of the parents (spouses) to maintain their family, including offering opportunity to the children to have access to education. It was found that parents teach their children regarding culture, discipline, and how to settle disputes in society. Furthermore, parents contribute to exposing their children to some home economics activities like cooking, washing, and engaging in crafts (like weaving baskets), which build their skills in co-curricular activities. In addition, parents participate in domestic activities with children such as storytelling - including stories that deal with superstition - , and imparting

proverbs, and this contributes to the development of family literacy. Here, parents are engaged in reading and playing together with their children, telling stories, dancing and singing together. Some parents are involved in guiding children in culture and sex education. For instance, participation of parents in sharing life experiences that relate to children studies (for example how people are dying of AIDS) helps children to appreciate what they learn in class. Furthermore, some parents and children have been participating together in family visits, attending community meetings, attending to the sick in hospitals, in burial activities, and wedding parties and this has helped children understand what they learn in class. Parents have also been instrumental in teaching their children table manners while eating together. In many cases, families observe Sundays, Christmas days, Easter days, birthdays of children and parents, and other occasions on which they organise parties, picnics and outings. The majority of the families pay visits to their friends together with their children. On such occasions, parents interact with their children and take advantage of showing practically how they want their children to behave and be in future. In fact, the Children Statute 1996 provides (Uganda, 1996, Section 7) puts the duty and responsibility of looking after a child on the parents. The majority of respondents indicated that children's environment helps them to socialise and learn how to communicate, to develop language and empowers the children to fit into the socio-economic environment.

Participation by other family members and the community facilitates information literacy within the family. For instance, in most families, elder children teach their siblings skills such as swimming, reading, writing, and reading and in many cases get involved in taking them on outings. In such outings, parents identify the difficulties which children encounter and that require help in the development of family literacy. Relatives and cultural leaders help to teach cultural practices and customs among the children. They give advice based on their past experiences, and the expectations of a child as he/she grows. Through such interactions, children come to understand their culture, decent ways of dressing, ways of showing respect, and issues related to privacy, which help in the development of family literacy. Furthermore, interaction with the community enables children to participate in activities that create opportunities for children to learn together with their parents. Strong community participation was noted in religious involvements. For instance, in many of the families, children and parents attend church services, group fellowships, Bible studies, and read Bibles together and participate in church choirs with their children. As noted earlier, Mood (1998:6), Kigongo (1994:22) and McKnight (1985:10) demonstrate the need for respecting God through reading the Bible. According to the study, in the majority of families, children and parents say their prayers

together before going to bed. This is not a surprise in Uganda as its motto is “For God and my Country”. Fearing God has contributed to the spiritual growth of many families and instils in children some good norms and practices, such as respecting parents, and loving neighbours and friends to avoid conflict. This is why Nkawake (2003:91) believes that “there is every reason why parents should play a role in enhancing family literacy”. In fact, the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda states: “Every effort shall be made to integrate all peoples of Uganda while at the same time recognizing the existence of their ethnic, religious, ideological, political, and cultural diversity” (Uganda, 1995, Article 1).

Consulting books and reading together by parents and children have helped in the development of information literacy skills in the family. Some of these cases are exhibited in the use of newspapers, especially youth-targeted ones such as *Straight Talk*. This has helped to bridge the communication gap between children and parents. Some newspapers incorporate education and children pullout sections on specific days. For example, *Children’s Vision*, which is inserted into the Saturday edition of the *New Vision*, enables children to learn about various issues like dressing, drawing, design, puzzles, pen-friends, happy birthday messages, etc. In a few instances, parents buy educational books for reference (like books on health), newspapers and magazines for children to be read at home. Some of the parents listen to radio and watch TV together with their children. For instance radio and television (TV) stations have special programmes for children. Examples of such programmes are the Children’s Club and *Emiti Emito* programmes on Wavamuno Broadcasting Services (WBS) TV, which increases access to learning among the children. Through such attempts, some educational programmes on TV concerning how children are being tortured, kidnapped, defiled, etc as learning lessons for children enable children to learn new things. In other instances, families visit places like wildlife education centres, recreational centres, cultural centres, museums and others. In other cases, families play indoor games, such as scrabble, playing cards, snakes-and-ladders and chess together with their children. Indeed, this builds on the co-curricular activities incorporated in the school curricula. Article 34 ((2) of the Uganda Constitution, Article 28 (1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and Section 6 (1) (a|) of the Children Statute all protect the right of children to education (FHRI, 2000:63).

It is indeed true that there have been attempts at applying the family and social life approach, the parent, school and teacher relationship, and libraries and readership development in the Ugandan context. Most of these attempts have been made at the individual family level and no programme

is in place to integrate the information literacy skills. There are a number of challenges that limit such efforts.

### **Challenges to Family Literacy**

Interviews and documentary reviews indicated poverty as one of the most common challenges affecting the majority of the families in the country. According to the respondents, some families are too poor to afford school fees, to provide essential needs like scholastic materials, meals and others requirements to their children, and this has forced children to move from school to school and in some cases to dropout. According to them, children in some families have to work in the evening to raise money for school fees. This assertion is clearly confirmed by UNICEF (2007) which states that in Uganda, there are 700,000 children aged 6-14 who have never been to school and 2.7 million children who are working because of poverty, and that 62 percent of the population of Ugandans living in poverty are children. With a population of 24.7 million, of whom 12.1 million are male and 12.6 million female (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2003:1), Uganda has a high rate of illiteracy. This situation is more common as a result of the HIV/AIDS scourge that seen the number of orphans increase. The 2002 Ugandan population census indicated that 15 percent of the children were orphans (UNICEF, 2005:37), and about 3.2 percent had lost both parents, 2.2. Percent had lost their mothers and 8.4 had lost their fathers, while 15 percent of the children were engaged in child labour (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2003:15). This situation is happening despite the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997. However, the Government of Uganda developed a number of programmes, including the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), with the aim of reducing mass poverty by the year 2017, to ensure that ‘individuals who are intellectually developed, skilled, productive, purposeful in life, prudent, earn meaningful incomes, save and invest, are well provided for and enjoy socio-economic security and reasonable standards of living. Skills for families are required to ensure better health, nutrition and family life, and the capacity for continued life long learning.

To meet the above family life demands, parents have tended to be too busy with their businesses and jobs to contribute to attend to the children learning needs. This has resulted in lack of time for and contact with children on the part of parents. For instance, the business and work commitments of both men and women, and of parents working abroad or outside families affect the children’s social contact with their parents and this limits their levels of family literacy. For instance, the pressure of work on parents means that they return home tired, and thus do not have the energy to pay attention to their children’s educational needs. It is sometimes difficult



for parents' job commitments to allow them to fit into family activities. Consequently, children are more used to teachers and thus some do not trust what their parents tell them. In many cases, parents believe that it is the duty of the teacher to teach the children; after all they pay the school fees, so they should not be burdened with children's homework. Lack of interaction between children and parents is more pronounced in cases where the children attend boarding schools or stay in hostels. Although there is evidence that such students perform well, they miss the social contact of the parents and this affects their capacity for life long learning. Those parents who have attempted to spare time for their children noted that some children dodge them, claiming that they are tired or sick, which limits the opportunities for parents to participate in reading and learning together with their children. Indeed, some children may be sickly and others slow learners, while others may be just shy. This affects the rate at which the parents participate in reading and learning with them.

Parents too have contributed to the lack of interaction with their children. For instance, drunkenness and the associated late coming home have affected the development of literacy levels in families. It was noted that some parents are rude to their children, which has affected their learning abilities. It was further noted that in families where both parents drink, they find it difficult to get any free time to share and learn together with their children as a family. Demographic changes, changes in family life, divorce and the subsequent legal battles for the children, single parenting, and working mothers have limited child nurturing and thus family literacy.

The communication gap between parents and children has significantly affected family literacy. For instance, there is evidence of lack of openness among parents regarding certain issues (such as their AIDS/HIV status) and this limits children's learning. It was noted that some children obtained information about their parents through peers, and that this affected them psychologically. The generation gap too has inhibited family literacy. For instance, some parents are frightened of the possibility that their children might laugh at them in case they fail to answer some questions with which the children want help. Furthermore, the children's choice of TV channels and programmes differs from those of their parents. The children's love for pornographic movies and other adult movies and newspaper sections affects the parent's participation in learning with their children. The differences in the nature of the language used by family members affect the role of parents in reading and learning together with their children. Whereas teaching in most Ugandan schools is done in English, the majority of homes

communicate using the mother tongue. This makes it difficult for the parents to understand and translate the child's work from English. A different approach that ensures that children are able to understand parents better is required.

Non-availability of libraries and an environment for readership development has inhibited family literacy. For instance, some families live in single rooms and others hardly have any space to sit down together and learn as a family, which is one reason why some parents return home late at night. In other homes, there is lack of reading materials. The only books that could be available are the class textbook given to the children. Some families have no access to and lack the capacity to buy reading materials, such as newspapers and magazines. Although there are chances of using the school libraries in the area, there is no strategy that ensures that children use such books at home. Besides, there is no motivation for using such facilities. Although a number of development partners have attempted to address the family literacy programmes, information access skills to sustain such an effort has been limited. Some of the family literacy programmes in Uganda include UPLIFT-Uganda, Complimentary Opportunity for Primary Education (COPE), Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK), Basic Education for Urban Areas (BEUPA), Family Basic Education (FABE) and Literacy Adult Basic Education (LABE). These programmes, however, have limited information access strategies to ensure sustainable lifelong learning. To ensure that parents utilise schools and participate together with their children, the Uganda Library Association, the Reading Association of Uganda and the National Library of Uganda and National Book Trust of Uganda have participated in organising and hosting reading camps in the country. At such events, the parents are invited to participate together with their children in reading competitions, writing, storytelling and quizzes (Ukech, 2004:21). The children get to learn and reflect on their culture and traditional values (Gafabuse, 2004:1). For instance, the Masaka Kitabiro Community Library in Masaka district targets various stakeholders, including churches, community groups and families, to ensure that parents get to know about what their children like to read, and that they should be encouraged to make use of the library (Batambuze, 2002:12). This is why UNESCO (1999) adopted the School Library Manifesto that all members of the school community, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, profession and social status. In addition, the Government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, is developing a School Library Development Policy to implement the principles of this manifesto. A strategy to integrate such developments is required in families.

## **Synthesis, Summary, Conclusions and Implications**

### **Synthesis**

This paper attempts to explain the conditions for building family literacy skills among children and parents. Parents are the pillars of family literacy and provide leadership to the entire family literacy programme. This requires a positive and supportive environment for parents to gain skills and the confidence needed for a sustainable family literacy programme. There are a number of family literacy programmes and efforts that have been undertaken, ranging from constitutional provisions, government policies, and international declarations to development partners' initiatives. Many of these programmes attempt to help and strengthen families in relation to issues such as poverty eradication, conflict resolution, education and training, and the protection of children, and they all have a link with family literacy. Participation, partnerships and collaboration between various community networks, including family members, schools, religious institutions, development partners, and central and local governments are therefore crucial in enhancing family literacy. The integration of family literacy agendas into such networks and stakeholders' programmes will ensure that information literacy skills are imparted to families for lifelong learning.

However, the challenge of poverty in most families limits the acquisition of such skills. This has inhibited interaction between children and parents, which has increased the communication gap between parents and their children, and this has significantly affected family literacy. The non-existence of libraries and right environment for readership development in families and communities too has hampered the acquisition of such skills. This is why a strategy to integrate the information literacy skills into the various family literacy programmes for sustainable lifelong learning is required.

This paper provided an impressionistic account on approaches for building family literacy skills among parents and children in developing countries. The paper was based on premises that information literacy skills enable individuals to recognize when information is needed and the capacity to locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information. From literature, it was noted that there three many approaches that have been adopted and used globally in an effort to promote the development of family literacy, including, the family and social life, home-school relationships, the use of libraries and readership development. Although the available approaches showed interaction between the children and parents, they lacked strategies for integrating information literacy skills. A descriptive, case study research design conducted in

Kampala District in Uganda was therefore adopted to assess the approaches of building family literacy skills among parents and children and establish the challenges that limit such in Uganda. It is indeed true that there have been attempts for applying the family and social life approach, the parent, school and teacher relationship, and libraries and readership development in Uganda in the development of family literacy. However, most of these attempts do not integrate the information literacy skills. The level of poverty in most families, inadequate time for interaction and communication gap between parents and children and absence of libraries and a conducive environment for readership development has contributed to such.

### **Conclusion**

There is hardly any information skills programme in Uganda that enables the building of family literacy. Lack of libraries and an environment conducive to readership development have inhibited the development of family literacy. In order to integrate information skills in the development of family literacy, parents are obliged to assume a leading role in developing and promoting the child's moral, social and educational needs. Therefore, developing a Family Information Literacy Programme (FILP) to ensure that a child builds abilities of exploiting the available opportunities to access information for lifelong learning is required in developing countries.

### **Implications**

The FILP programme recognises the role of various stakeholders, including family members, religious institutions, communities, libraries, non-governmental organisations and the government, among others. Family members should establish family clubs/groups for small groups of parents and children to promote book-sharing strategies. In such endeavours, a mixed-age grouping should be encouraged to enable older children to offer support to younger ones who can function as 'master players'. Such groups could visit learning centres like the Wildlife Education Centre, children's parks, the museums, fellowships, etc to help children learn with the involvement of parents. In such clubs, members would be able to borrow books and read together, and parents would not only encourage but monitor the children's networks and groups. Such clubs/groups would entail an outreach programme that promotes the use of books for infants and young children to promote the love for reading amongst them. In turn, families or homes could endeavour to establish a FILP corner or box to make sure the children have a place to keep books and reading materials. A FILP box can work as a mobile library from which books can be borrowed by several families. Projects or programmes for best readers, storytellers,

writers, etc could be established. Under such projects, parents would establish incentives (like giving prizes) to provide motivation to children. Under FILP families and communities could have defined roles, terms of reference and activities. For FILP to succeed, the following conditions would have to be met:

- Schools and community/public libraries should integrate the FILP programme to ensure sustainable reading and learning among families so that they develop information literacy skills.
- The government and the communities should encourage and promote the establishment of libraries and community resource centres. Communities should establish and encourage information services such as computer use and the Internet to enable families to utilise them. The existing community centres would facilitate the coordination, mobilisation and sensitisation of family members within the community.
- Development partners like professional societies, NGOs, the government, religious institutions, schools, and local councils should introduce, encourage and integrate FILP programmes and scholarships to ensure interaction between parents and children within those programmes. Such development partners should promote the use of libraries, from which parents and children can borrow books to enable them to read at home. They should also integrate promotional activities, including discussions, exhibitions and demonstrations of FILP, to ensure that parents and children appreciate the need for such a programme.

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