

2488

# **THE FAMILY LITERACY PROJECT**

## **BRINGING LITERACY SKILLS TO YOUNG CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION**

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## ABSTRACT

The Family Literacy Project addresses the need to raise the level of literacy in disadvantaged areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Literacy groups have been established in a number of rural communities in the mountainous western part of the province. The present evaluation investigates the ways in which the Project has influenced family practices with respect to literacy. This has been done by comparing literacy practices of three groups of women who are caregivers to three to five year old children: those who had participated in a literacy group for more than two years, those who had joined a literacy group more recently, and women with similar educational backgrounds from the same areas and with children of the same age who did not take part in the project. All of the participants in the study have less than Grade 9 education themselves.

The participants were interviewed to obtain basic information on their family circumstances and the ways in which family members interacted with the three to five year olds in their family with the purpose of determining what preparation for literacy was available to the children. There were four parts to the observational study and each sequence was videotaped at the participant's home:

- (1&2) Discussions between caregivers and children about two pictures with the child.
- (3) The handling of books
- (4) The use of drawing materials

The questionnaire responses showed that the three groups were alike in most practical aspects of their families and homes, but differed in the extent of their literacy activities: the long terms participants in the literacy groups (Group 3) had more printed materials in their homes and made more use of literacy in their daily life and in their interactions with children.

Parts 1 and 2 of the observational study showed that Group 3 children spoke more frequently about the pictures than children in the other two groups, and their caregivers introduced more themes into their discussions. Group 3 emphasized more aspects of the pictures, they elaborated on the information in a variety of ways to interest and educate the children, and they referred more to the children's own experience. The difference between the Group 3 caregivers and the less experienced groups lay in the content, fluency and frequency of their interactions with children when discussing the pictures.

The Group 2 caregivers (those who had recently joined the programme) showed these characteristics to a lesser extent than Group 3 caregivers but more than the Group 1 caregivers (those who had not participated in the programme), indicating a progression across time towards more effective communication with respect to educational topics.

In the handling of books and preparation for drawing, the Group 3 caregivers were less directive towards children than the caregivers in the other two groups, and more supportive. The Group 3 children produced a greater variety of drawings.

In conclusion, the authors of this study recommend that there should be affirmation of the considerable achievements of caregivers who have persevered with the literacy group meetings, which may also serve to encourage others. Attention should be given at meetings to children's potential to practise literacy skills from an early age. Project management should seek out more varied and challenging literacy materials to maintain enthusiasm for the project and to extend the information available to participants.

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## INTRODUCTION

As Desmond discussed in her dissertation on the project (Desmond, 2001), the impetus for starting the Family Literacy Project came from the results of the national Early Childhood Development Pilot Project indicating that standards of literacy and numeracy amongst Grade 1 and Grade R classes did not improve over the three year study period, and that "only a quarter of community-based sites are offering "high" quality education" (Khulisa Management Services 2000: iii). This confirmed the findings of an earlier report (Taylor, 1989) which presented evidence of a very high failure rate nationally in first grade, and especially in KwaZulu-Natal primary schools.

An investigation in rural and urban areas (Kvalsvig et al, 1991) showed that Zulu and Sotho five-yearolds tended to get their information about schooling and literacy from older siblings rather than adults. Many of the adults in that study had not had much schooling themselves, and gave out negative messages, probably derived from their own unpleasant experiences of harsh discipline and didactic teaching methods in school. This was unlikely to make the prospect of entering primary school attractive to five yearolds, and it was evident from a content analysis of family discussions that adults felt ill-at-ease in a situation where even very young children had the advantage of greater knowledge.

The present Family Literacy Project in KwaZulu-Natal serves communities where adults have had limited access to education, and literacy rates are low. There are a number of reasons for this. For many rural families the nearest primary school was, and is, far away from their homes, and small children make tiring journeys on foot each day. Many rural schools are of poor quality and there is consequently little incentive to maintain this effort. There has been little literature in Zulu to interest or assist adults in these communities, and the cost of books, magazines and newspapers are beyond the pockets of many people. All this points to the fact that literacy has had very little place in local culture.

The operating environment for the project is changing in many respects. On the one hand there is a sense that a better life is possible following the change to a democratic government in 1994; that educational and employment opportunities are no longer deliberately withheld from the poor and disenfranchised. On the other hand there is confusion and dread as the HIV/AIDS epidemic threatens the health and well-being of this population. Both children and adults urgently need new windows on the world to help them make informed choices about how to conduct their lives. They need the wider access to information that literacy can bring.

The present investigation has been undertaken with these factors in mind:

1. Impoverished communities in rural areas find it difficult to access good quality schooling.
2. There is evidence of disjunction between generations on the subject of literacy: older children often have more formal schooling than their parents.
3. There is a difficult transition into school for children, and without literacy skills parents cannot play a useful role in assisting their children.
4. The lives of ordinary people have been simultaneously affected by two major forces: a new, democratic government which has opened up opportunities for a better life, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic which has brought suffering and death. Literacy skills put people in touch with a wider range of information than can be obtained by word of mouth, in order to inform decisions about education and employment, and protection against infection.

There is considerable evidence in the educational literature which supports the view that an early acquisition of literacy enhances children's later reading comprehension (for example, Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997), and that this is best commenced in the home with the parents as mediators in a shared experience. The KZN Family Literacy Project has adopted an action plan which includes building and encouraging joint adult-child activities around literacy, engaging both children and adults in such activities as talking about pictures and stories. We have chosen an analysis of this activity as the basis of the present study.

The evaluation team has designed a methodology to uncover the ways in which the Project has influenced family practices with respect to literacy, and to understand how new ideas are being absorbed and utilised. The data set on which this evaluation is based is intended to extend the earlier evaluation based on the experiences of four women (Desmond, 2001) by looking at a larger sample of women who have been part of the project now for two or more years. Their ways of interacting with children are compared with those of women who have only recently joined the project and women who have not taken part in the project at all.



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## 2.

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### AIM

The aim of the evaluation was broadly to investigate whether the Family Literacy Project has assisted participants to bring literacy skills to the young children in their family. The approach has been largely observational and qualitative in order to describe and understand the methodologies utilised by the adults who have participated in the Family Literacy Project over an extended period, as compared with women from the same communities who have less exposure to the programme or women who have not participated at all..

A key consideration has been to collect information in a way which can be reflected back to project management and participants to assist them plan the further development of the project.

## METHODOLOGY

### The participants

Participants came from mountainous areas of KwaZulu-Natal. The Family Literacy Facilitators in the area were asked to request participants in the programme who were caregivers to children between the ages of three and five years if they would consent to participating in the study. Two groups of women were recruited into the study – twelve women who had been part of the programme since its inception (approximately two years) and ten women who had recently joined the programme. For the purposes of comparison a further group of ten caregiver/child dyads from the same areas were recruited into the study: the criteria for selection were that they should have children between the ages of three and five years, and that their standard of education should be no higher than Grade 9.

Group 1: Participants who were not enrolled in the Family Literacy Project.

Group 2: Participants who had been enrolled in the project for less than two years or had attended very few sessions.

Group 3: Participants who had been enrolled in the project for more than two years and attended meetings regularly.

In the majority of cases the caregivers were the mothers of the children, but there were also six grandmothers and one aunt.

### The procedure:

Two research assistants from the Human Sciences Research Council were introduced to the participants by the Family Literacy Project facilitators. One research assistant explained the procedure to the caregiver and then interviewed her while the second assistant set up the videocamera. Once the interview was complete, the video camera was switched on and the caregiver and child were handed two pictures in sequence and asked to discuss them. The child was then given a children's book to look at, and to keep, and the ensuing interaction between caregiver and child was also videotaped. Finally the child was given a drawing book and some crayons as a thankyou present, and asked to draw something. This sequence was also videotaped.

### The questionnaire

Participants were first interviewed in Zulu ( see Appendix 1 for questionnaires) at their homes to obtain basic information on their family circumstances and the way in which family members interacted with the three to five year olds in the family. The central issue was to determine what preparation for literacy was available to the children.

### **The videotaped observational study**

There were four parts to the observational study, and each sequence was videotaped for a minimum of three minutes if the interaction had faltered or a maximum of five minutes.

*Parts 1 and 2:* Caregivers were requested to sit and discuss two pictures with the child while the proceedings were videotaped. The pictures were presented one at a time.

*Part 3:* The child was then handed a book upside-down and the wrong way round in order to see whether the child would be able to turn the book, and how the caregiver would assist the child.

*Part 4:* Finally the child was given a drawing book and some crayons and asked to draw a picture.

### **The analysis**

The responses to the questionnaires were tabulated using SPSS to generate the tables.

NVivo software was used to code the transcripts according to content and utterances. This coding was done 'blind' by a researcher who had not been involved in the data collection and was not aware of the experimental group membership of the participants. The codes were grouped into themes, and models were developed to depict the relationship between themes.

The difference between the groups was assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The capacity of the NVivo software to profile the material generated by the three groups under any code or set of codes was utilised to obtain scores on some key aspects of these data, with the purpose of showing how the experience of women on the literacy programme had shaped their communicative behaviour relative to those with less exposure to the programme. Where differences were striking, statistical tests were conducted.

However, essentially the analysis was qualitative in intent: to show the way in which the Group 3 women had become skilful in engaging the attention of the children, and to seek out ways in which this performance could be enhanced. This was done utilising functional models and examples.

## TEACHING CHILDREN AT HOME

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information on the resources available to family members in the home environment, and family practices with respect to child-rearing in the 3-5 year old age group. Of particular interest was access written information in the family environment and the utilisation of literacy skills.

### HOMES AND FAMILIES

All but one of the families live in traditional huts, and none owned vehicles. All but three families had been in the same home for more than two years. On the whole the participants in this study came from impoverished home backgrounds, with not many amenities. Most had lived in the same homes for over two years. There is a noticeable difference between groups, however, on the amount of reading material in the homes, with most Group 3 women having reading material of one sort or another at home.

**Table 1 Homes and Families**

	Group 1 (Not attended the family literacy groups) N=10	Group 2 (Newcomers to the family literacy groups) N=10	Group 3 (Attended for over two years) N=12
No in family: Mean (sd)	6.0 (2.58)	6.6 (1.78)	6.6 (2.35)
Employment ratio; Mean (sd) (No employed/family size)	.05 (.106)	.12 (.102)	.20 (.122)
Electricity	6	3	1
Water (protected springs)	4	8	3
Television	3	4	0
Radio	5	6	7
Telephone	0	1	0
Cell phone	1	1	3
Books	1	3	2
Children's books	1	0	1
Magazines	0	1	7
Newspapers	1	1	6

## CHILDREN LEARNING

In order to find out whether caregivers normally included educational activities in their interactions with children, respondents were first asked an open-ended question "What did you do with your child yesterday?". Educational activities were mostly cited by Group 3 caregivers (see Table 2).

**Table 2: What did you do with your child yesterday?**

(no. of respondents) [Group membership of those doing educational activities]

Chores	Educational	Other
Went to the river to fetch water (3)	Cutting out pictures from a magazine (1)[Group 3]	Church (2)
Collect wood (2)	Teaching parts of the body (1) [Group 3]	Chatting (5)
Cleaned grandmother's house (2)	Look at magazines (3) [Group 3]	Annual vaccinations (1)
Watering garden (1)	Look at family literacy books(1) [Group 3]	Nothing (4)
Cleaned house (1)	Look at old school books (1) [Group 2]	
Raked yard (1)	Child was teaching mother Preschool rhymes (1) [Group 1]	
Went to the shops (1)		
Collect pension with grandmother(1)		
Collect water for fowl project (1)		

Respondents were then asked a series of questions designed to find out what pre-school aged children were learning and who was likely to be teaching them. A little more than half of the children were attending a preschool. This figure is higher than average and probably simply reflects the close association between the literacy groups and the ECD sites. The children were said to spend most of their time with mothers and grandmothers, and about two-thirds spent some time at least with fathers. Joint activities with mothers and grandmothers centred around domestic chores without much in the way of entertainment or educational pursuits. Reading to children was, however, a frequent activity for both Group 2 and Group 3 dyads (see Table 3).

Table 3: Who do children learn from and what do they learn?

	Group 1 N=10	Group 2 N=10	Group 3 N=12
N	10	10	12
Children attending preschool	5	5	8
Average age (years)	4.0	4.2	4.3
<i>The person the child spends most time with</i>			
Mother	6	5	6
Brother or sister	1	1	2
Grandmother	1	2	4
Neighbour	1	0	0
Other relative	1	2	0
<i>Children whose fathers interact with them</i>			
Never	3	4	5
Sometimes	1	3	4
Often	6	3	3
<i>Ways in which fathers interact with children.</i>			
Talk	0	4	3
Talk and Play	7	1	3
Talk and Play and Do Home Chores	0	1	1
<i>Ways in which caregivers interact with children</i>			
Cleaning	8	8	11
Listening to radio (adult)	4	5	4
Listening to radio (child)	3	6	3
Watching TV (adult)	2	2	0
Watching TV (child)	2	3	1
Mother reads to child	2	6	7
Cook with mother	7	6	7
Shop with mother	9	7	8
Fetch water with mother	6	8	9
Fetch wood with mother	6	3	6
Garden with mother	5	9	8

Most of the children's time was spent playing with other children. In answer to the question "How does your child spend most of his/her time at home, most caregivers (23) said that the child played with other children, some (8) said the child played alone, and one carer said that he followed her around. Either alone or with others most children played pretend games about households and families, they pretended to cook, and some played with dolls (7). Very few other toys were mentioned and children mainly played with mud (making cooking pots and cows), tins and other containers for pots, they drew cars in the sand, and played with old tyres. A few played ball with others, or skipping or games of catch. One played with puppies. Only one child scribbled and

looked at magazines. In answer to a specific question about the availability of toys, only two children had access to crayons or paints, and one to blocks. Eighteen children had access to radios and the same number to books supplied by the programme.

In answer to the question "In what ways do you help your child learn at home?" nine caregivers in all said they were not teaching their children. Five of these were control group caregivers. Of the four respondents who attended the literacy groups and who said did not teach, two offered explanations: one said she could not yet read herself, and another said that her child had a speech problem. Table 4 gives details of the kind of teaching the mothers thought was appropriate for this age group.

**Table 4: How caregivers help children to learn.**

Activity	N=32*
Looking at books and magazines	12
Naming objects in the picture	9
Writing (usually vowels)	5
Counting	4
Rhymes	3
Drawing pictures	2
Naming body parts	1
Asking child what she did at preschool today	1

\*Some caregivers gave more one answer.

There were no differences between the three groups on the ages the respondents thought it appropriate for children to start activities leading to literacy and numeracy, although there was variation within groups, and generally the ages suggested were high.

**Table 5: Starting ages for literacy and numeracy activities**

	Mean age in years
Adults tell stories to children	5.4
Adults read stories to children	5.5
Children count to 20	5.6
Children say the alphabet	6.2
Write the numbers 1-10	6.5
Write his/her name	6.6
Read stories alone	8.1

#### **Learning from the media**

There was very little difference between the groups in the numbers of children who listened to radio programmes and the kinds of programmes they listened to. Twenty-three children listened to the radio, most of them (19 children) at home, and the remainder at a neighbours'. They usually listened for about an hour a day.

## USING LITERACY

The Family Literacy Project groups utilised more publications in every category of written material. Most notably, Group 3 made substantially more use of magazines.

Table 6: Use of the written word

	All %	Group 1 N=10	Group 2 N=10	Group 3 N=12
Letters	72	6	8	9
Newspapers	38	3	3	6
Information pamphlets	25	2	2	4
Advertisements	13	1	1	2
Magazines	34	2	2	7

*Letters* were most frequently to friends and family (18), with 3 respondents saying that they wrote letters to obtain assistance, and 2 saying that they wrote messages to neighbours.

*News* was obtained mainly from Isolezwa (4), the Family Literacy Project newsletter (3), Ilanga (3) with two people reading UmAfrika.

*Pamphlets* were about AIDS awareness (4), babycare (1), skin diseases (1), electricity (1) and TB (1).

*Advertisements* were about special offers in shops.

The *magazines* read were Bona (4) and Drum (7).

*Children's favourite books:* Nine children had favourite books:

2 from Group 1 – A hymn book and a Mother Goose Song Book.

2 from Group 2 – Masihambisane, and one where the caregiver didn't know the name.

5 from Group 3 – Books from the programme about colours and numbers; Isandla; eZwini; Uma Sengimadala; Yizani sifunde.

## Proficiency

Out of a possible score of 9 for proficiency in reading the overall average was 7.4. Group 1 had the highest average score (8.0) compared with 7.1 for Group 2 and 7.3 for Group 3.

Most respondents had learnt to read at school (24). Five had learnt at the Family Literacy Programme, two at home and one at another literacy programme.

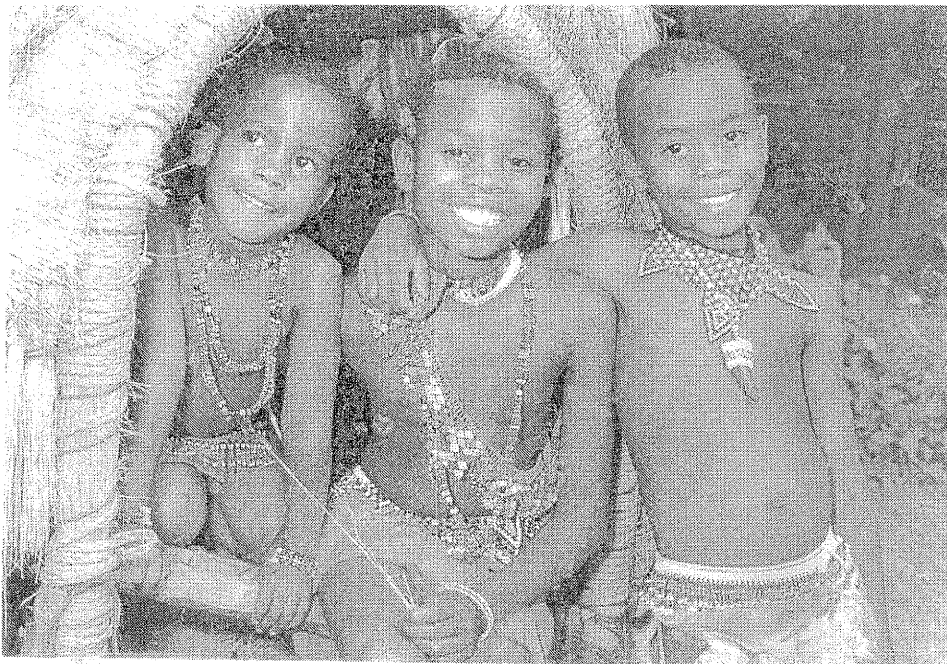


## SUMMARY OF MAIN RESULTS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

- All three groups came from poverty-stricken areas with few resources.
- The groups were alike in most respects but differed with respect to reading. Group 3 caregivers had more printed material in their homes.
- Children spend most of their time with other children, and mothers and grandmothers were the main caregivers. Quite a high proportion of children attended preschool.
- Household chores were the main joint activities between caregivers and children, but Group 3 caregivers incorporated more educational activities into their interactions with children than other groups.
- At home children in all three groups lacked access to toys, educational games and writing materials.
- Parental expectations were low regarding the appropriate age for literacy activities.
- Although the average literacy proficiency scores for Group 3 women was lower than that for Group 1 women, the long term participants in the Family Literacy Project utilised literacy more for practical purposes.

## ENGAGING CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN PICTURES

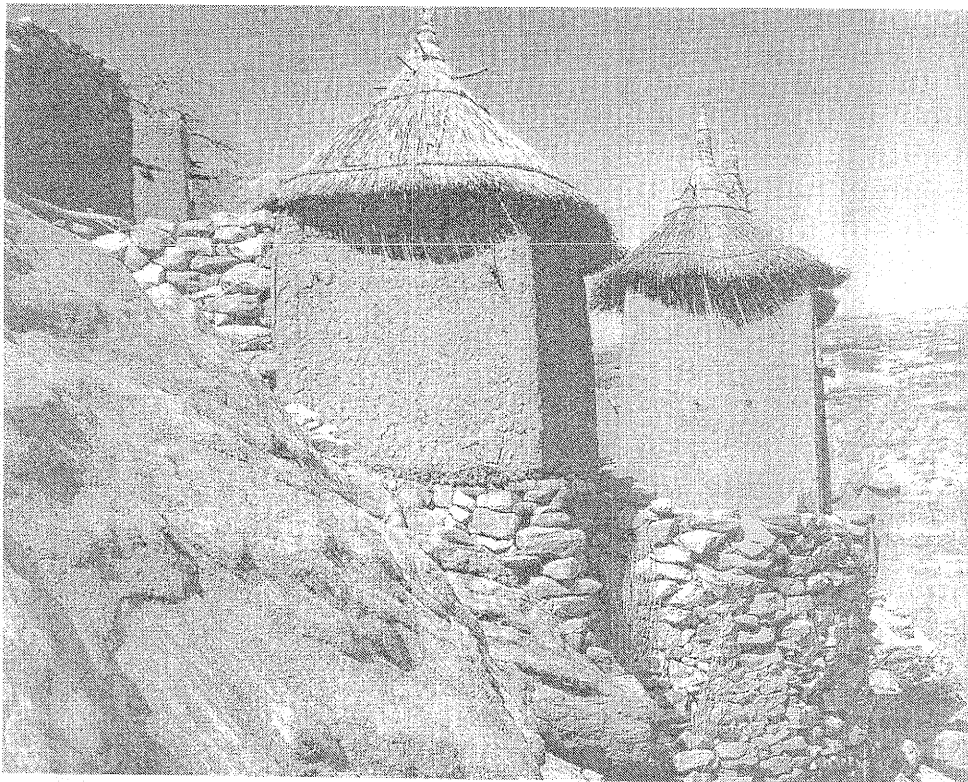
Figure 1: Picture 1



### Conversation box 1: Picture 1

- Mother : Hay bo! Who is kneeling down here? Mmm.... Just have a look, who is this one? Just tell your mother.
- Child : (laughs)
- Mother : Who is this one? Do you know these girls? Have you ever heard of girls going to Shaka's day to do the traditional dance? Don't they wear things like this? Who is this one wearing a beshu? You are keeping quiet as if you don't know how to utter a word. Just look at this one he's wearing his beautiful beshu. What are those kneeling down wearing? What would you say this is? She is wearing beads like a grown up girl. Is it that you also see her wearing it?
- Child : (nodding his head smiling)
- Mother : Tell your mother what you see and what you know from this picture. Do you know this? What is it that you know?
- Child : It's a house.

Figure 2: Picture 2



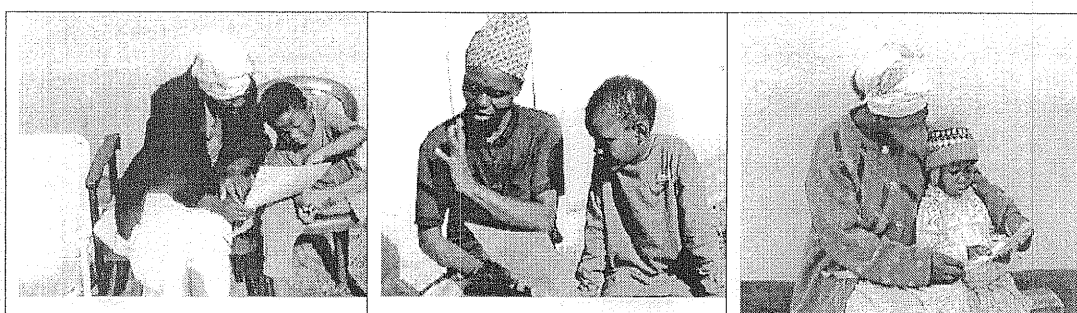
## Conversation box 2: Picture 2

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Mother | : Is your house plaited like this?   |
| Child  | : Mmm.   |
| Mother | : Did they plait the roof like this?   |
| Child  | : (nodding his head)   |
| Mother | : Hay bo! Who do you know that plaits roofs? Who built your house?   |
|        | Mmmm. (child keeps on smiling and not responding) Was it a person from Hlayeni? Don't you know how to speak out, mmmm? What is this? |
| Child  | : These are stones.  |
| Mother | : These are stones. They've built a kraal with these rough stones.   |

## COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

Some children were shy, overawed by the presence of strangers, and required some skilful handling before their attention could be focused on the task at hand which was to discuss the two pictures. In order to assess the quality of this process we analysed the dialogue in three ways: the content of the interaction, the caregivers' utterances and their actions.

Figure 3: Communicating with children



Even though the study requirement that the caregiver/child pairs talked in front of strangers and a video camera, some children talked freely. The average number of times a child spoke appeared to be a function of the caregiver's experience with the Family Literacy project, and the gender of the child. Group 3 children talked much more frequently than Group 1 children, and Group 2 children were in-between on this measure. Interestingly there were more girls than boys in all groups. Girls spoke more on average than boys, so presumably where there was a choice caregivers chose to appear in front of the camera with a girl. The child's age did not appear to make much difference to their readiness to talk.

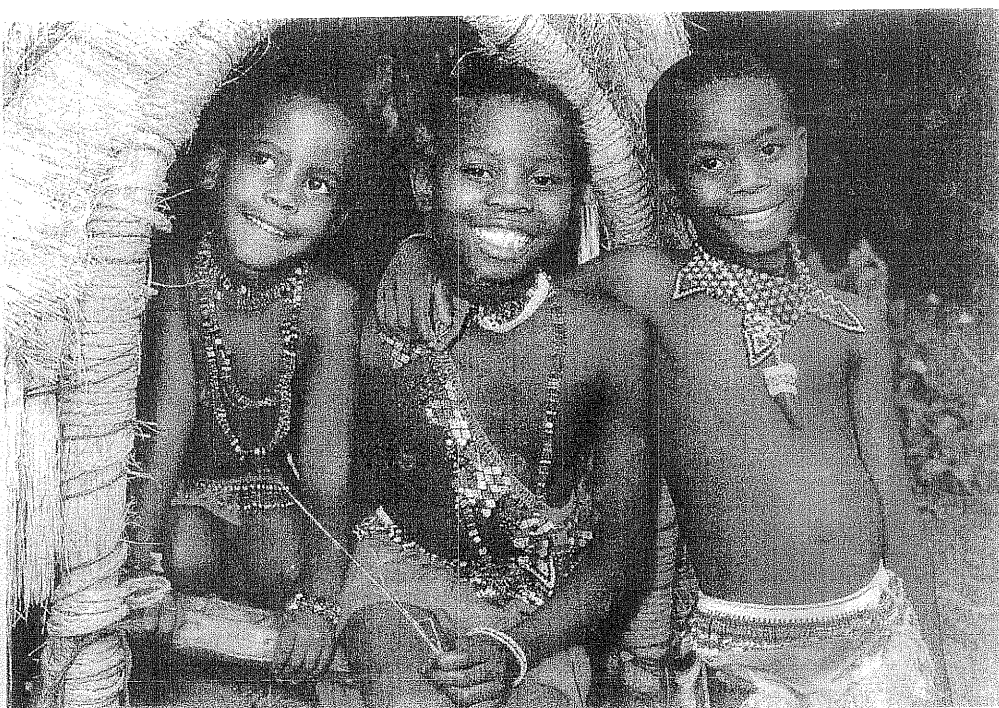
Table 7: The number of times the child spoke.

	Group 1 Mean no. of passages	Group 2 Mean no. of passages	Group 3 Mean no. of passages
Passages where the child spoke*	37	71	94
Boys only (n=9)	26	65	77
Girls only (n=23)	39	73	107

\* df=2,29 F=4.192, P=.025

## ENGAGING CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN PICTURES

Figure 1: Picture 1



### Conversation box 1: Picture 1

- Mother : Hay bo! Who is kneeling down here? Mmm.... Just have a look, who is this one? Just tell your mother.
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Figure 2: Picture 2



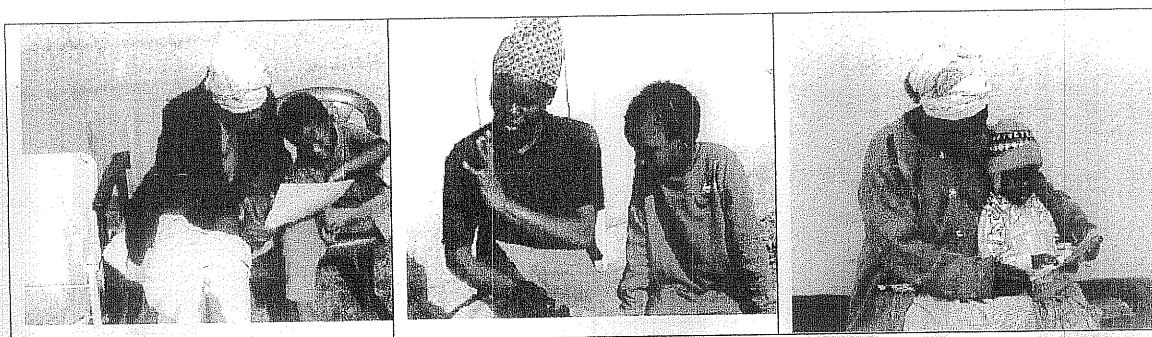
Conversation box 2: Picture 2

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
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**Figure 3: Communicating with children**



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## MEDIATED LEARNING

Interest in mediated learning has its origins in the work of Vygotsky who described children as learning from more experienced people in their culture. In order to explore this aspect of the caregivers' interactions with children, the content of the caregiver-child interaction with respect to the two pictures was coded according to the topic under discussion. The codes were grouped under the three main components of mediated learning: (1) emphasis or drawing attention to aspects of the topic, (2) elaboration on the topic, and (3) relating the topic to the child's experience.

Table 8 shows that the Group 3 participants who had the most experience with the literacy course used more content categories overall, than those in Groups 1 and 2, and more content categories in each of the components of mediated learning. Even at this superficial analytic level, there were statistically significant differences between the groups on the overall number of content categories and the number of passages using emphasis.

**Table 8: Content categories**

	Group 1 n=10 Mean no. of passages (Std. Dev.)	Group 2 n=10 Mean no. of passages (Std. Dev.)	Group 3 n=12 Mean no. of passages (Std. Dev.)
Total number of content categories used*	24	26	40
The caregiver <b>emphasized</b> aspects of a picture**	10	11	17
The caregiver <b>elaborated</b> on aspects of a picture	9	11	16
The objects in the picture were discussed with <b>reference</b> to the child's own experience	6	4	8

\* df=2,31, F=4.4, p=.021

\*\*df=2,31, F=4.4, p=.025

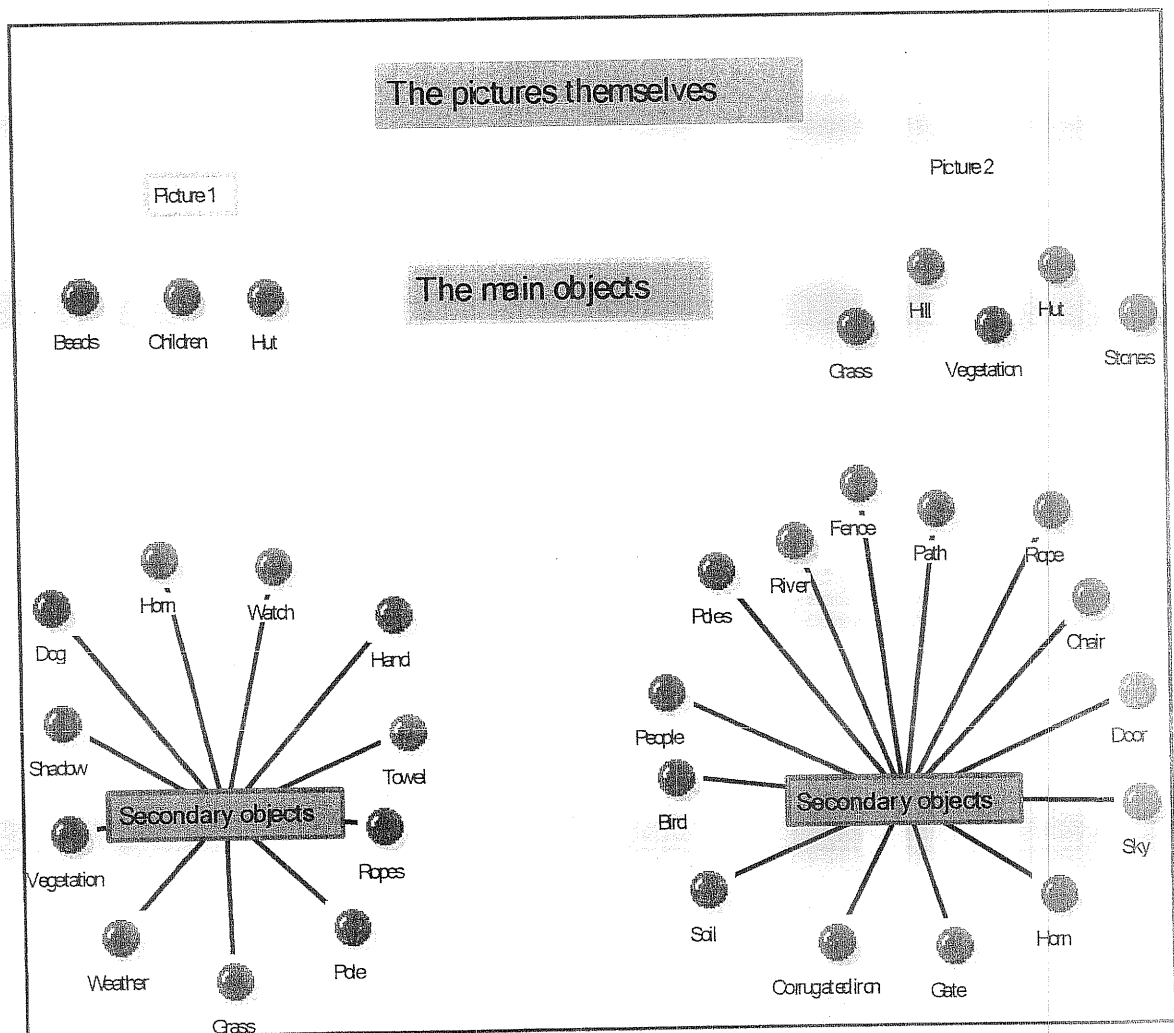


## EMPHASIS

This was the simplest and most widely used category and served the purpose of fixing the child's attention on the task at hand and introducing the child to the parameters of the situation.

Figure 1 illustrates how the caregivers sometimes emphasized the pictures themselves and discussed their value or attractiveness. Certain objects within each picture were emphasized by most caregiver/child dyads (primary objects). Some dyads took this aspect of mediated learning further by examining a number of less obvious, and in some cases, imaginary, objects (secondary objects).

Figure 4: Emphasis



*Talking about the pictures themselves:* This was done almost exclusively by Group 3 caregivers. They introduced children to attractiveness of pictures and the mechanics of looking at them (in effect they told the child: "you can't see anything at the back of the picture because they are two-dimensional"; and "you should keep the pictures clean").

### Conversation box 3: Talk about pictures

*Group 3 dyad*

- Mother : Don't touch that part of the picture because you are going to make it dirty.  
Do you see how beautiful it is?
- Child : Yes.
- Mother : Do you like to learn and see these pictures?
- Child : Yes.
- Mother : Really?
- Child : Yes.
- Mother : Okay.
- Child : I wish I could just always look at them.
- Mother : Do you wish that you could just always look at them?
- Child : Yes.

*Group 3 dyad*

- Child : Oh! No, I cannot turn it.
- Mother : It cannot be turned. This is not a book.
- Child : What is it?
- Mother : It is a picture which cannot be turned. This is a picture.
- Child : Put it here next to me. (moving close to her mother so that she can put the picture next to her on a chair)
- Mother : We should not to put it down. We should to look at the picture and talk about it.

*The main objects in the pictures* were the objects remarked on by almost everyone. In contrast, there were group differences in the mention of secondary objects.

*The secondary objects:* Group 3 dyads managed to find many other aspects of the pictures to talk about as well. They spoke about 18 different object categories in a total of 44 passages. Group 2 participants drew children's attention to 6 secondary object categories in a total of 15 text passages and Group 1 had 7 object categories and a total of 12 passages. Clearly the more experienced group was at an advantage here, and often introduced objects which could be used in discussions of function. The plaited ropes on the thatched roofs in the second picture are an example of this.

### Conversation box 4: Secondary objects

*Group 3 dyad*

- Mother : What is it tied up with?
- Child : It is tied up with ropes.
- Mother : With ropes?
- Child : Yes.
- Mother : Right, what kind of ropes are here?
- Child : There are many ropes. Some are black and others are white.

*Group 3 dyad*

- Child : What is this here?
- Mother : This is grass. It is plaited to make a rope. They took grass for roofing. They put it up so as to make roofing for the hut.

## ELABORATION

In this instance the caregivers went beyond the objects in the picture, utilising them to make other points:

The most frequently elaborated topics were what the children in Picture 1 were doing, an explanation of traditions (in what the children were wearing and how the huts were built), what the children in Picture 1 looked like (beautiful, clean, healthy), the quality of the huts in both pictures, and how they had been constructed. Group 3 caregivers spoke more about Colours than the other two groups (16 instances as opposed to one in each of the other groups). Overall Group 3 elaborated on topics more frequently than other groups (Group 3: 187 instances, Group 2: 100, Group 1: 91), but this was not true for everyone in Group 3: The range was from 1 to 27 instances. Nor is it true to say that all Group 1 members used this strategy infrequently (range 3-20); within each group there were good and bad elaborators.

The skilful use of elaboration allowed the caregivers to insert large chunks of educational information into the conversations. The subject matter of the two pictures enabled caregivers to tell children about traditional practices, and caregivers from Groups 2 and 3 took advantage of the opportunity.

### Conversation box 5: Teaching vocabulary and traditional practice

#### *Group 3 dyad*

Mother : Look at this one wearing a siphandla (goat skin armlet)

Child : Which one?

Mother : This one on the side.

Child : This one?

Mother : Yes.

Child : Mmmm.

Mother : Is it not a skin?

Child : Yes, it is. I know it.

Mother : It's a goat's one.

#### *Group 3 dyad*

GMother : This is isigege (loin covering worn by girls) The house that they are staying in is a qhugwane (beehive shaped grass hut) Do you know a qhugwane?

Child : Yes.

#### *Group 3 dyad*

Mother : Okay, what is this?

Child : It's a....., it's a... skin.

Mother : It's a skin.

Child : Yes.

Mother : This is what they call a beshu.

Child : It's a beshu.

One mother used the opportunity to talk to the child about colours and to introduce her to some English words.

### Conversation box 6: Teaching colours and language

#### *Group 3 Dyad*

Mother : It is green. Do you see the green colour?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Do you see it?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Where is the green colour?  
 Child : Here is it. (pointing at the picture)  
 Mother : Yes, where is the red one?  
 Child : (pointing at the picture with a smile)  
 Mother : This one is green. Where is the red one?  
 Child : Is this the one?  
 Mother : There's the red one. There's a green one again. There's a yellow one.  
 Child : Okay.  
 Mother : There's a bomvu one again. We say "red" at school. Do you understand?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Mmmm, we say to the luhlaza one "green". Do you understand?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : There's a blue one (colour).  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : ....which is like the sky. Do you see it?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Yes, this one is blue and this one is yellow. Do you see it?  
 Child : Yes, it is yellow.  
 Mother : There's a mhlophe one. We say "white" to that one at school.  
 Child : Okay.  
 Mother : Are you happy?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : You are now able to see?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Now you can tell that this is red, that is green and that is yellow. Just show me the yellow one?  
 Child : Here it is.  
 Mother : Hah! Where is the green one?  
 Child : Here it is.  
 Mother : Where is the red one?  
 Child : Here it is. Is this the one? (looking at her mother with a smile)  
 Mother : No, here is the red one. There's the red one, the green, the yellow one, the blue. Do you see the blue one?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Yes, there's a blue and that one showing up there is white.

Caregivers in all three groups used the opportunity for counting practice.

#### Conversation box 7: Counting

##### *Group 2 dyad*

Mother : How many houses do you see here?  
 Child : They are three.  
 Mother : Just count them.  
 Child : They are four.  
 Mother : Just count them.  
 Child : 1, 2, 3, 4. (pointing at the picture)  
 Mother : What about those ones? Why don't you count them?  
 Child : 5.  
 Mother : Start afresh.  
 Child : 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.  
 Mother : These are two houses.  
 Child : 6, 6.

#### REFERENCE TO THE CHILD'S OWN EXPERIENCE

The caregivers used references to the child's own experience in a number of ways. They asked:

1. Who the children in the picture resembled
2. Where the child had seen huts like the ones in the pictures.
3. What the child would tell her teacher.
4. Whether the child would like to wear the traditional finery

These kinds of questions mainly served the purpose of engaging the child's attention and co-operation. Some caregivers extended this and used the reference to suggest how the children should behave and what was valuable in the picture. Desmond (2001) referred to the fact that participants in the family literacy project sometimes said that they wanted a better life for their children when asked about their motivation for joining the project. In this study a Group 1 mother made the sad comment:

"Don't be like me because I'm not educated. You see I have built this house so that we'll stay in it, but it is not in a good condition. You need to behave well, because these are also girls like you [in picture 1]. All of them look beautiful. They are happy. You should always be happy, beautiful and clean as a child."

Other caregivers involved the children in constructing a fantasy around the people and objects in the picture. There were several examples of fantasy games which clearly amused both child and caregiver.

### Conversation box 8: A pretend game

#### *Group 2 Dyad*

- Mother : Which house is yours here?  
 Child : Its this one. (pointing at the picture)  
 Mother : Mine is that one. Who is going to have the one on that other side?  
 Child : It'll be mine.  
 Mother : Are you going to have two houses?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : I also like these stones. Which ones do you like?  
 Child : These ones which are mine.  
 Mother : Where are yours?  
 Child : These are mine.  
 Mother : Here are mine. Do you see the tree?  
 Child : Is it for your house?  
 Mother : Do you want it?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Take it so that it'll be your family's one.  
 Child : Here is my house.  
 Mother : Do you see the fence?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Do you also want it?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : It will be your family's one.  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Do you see that its beautiful over here?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : We would be happy if our home was like this one?  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : Which house would you prefer to stay in?  
 Child : I could stay in this one.  
 Mother : You could stay in this one.  
 Child : Yes.  
 Mother : You could stay in this one and I could stay in this one and we'll visit one another.  
 Child : Yes.

## COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The women utilised a number of communication strategies. Figure 4 shows diagrammatically how these related to the three components of mediation. There were four central and positive strategies which addressed all three components simultaneously (Approval, Fantasy, Information and Asking for Co-operation) and others that were specific to one component (as for example, Repetition, which served to emphasize the point just made and to give the child time to absorb it). Skilled communicators with children utilise a variety of strategies, while maintaining a balance. Too much Repetition, for instance, might lose the child's attention.

One strategy, which was utilised by a few Group 1 caregivers, was to threaten and making false promises. We termed this Untruths in the analysis, and viewed this as frankly counterproductive. These caregivers were using short-term gains to ensnare the child's attention, but ultimately they destroyed their own credibility.

### Conversation box 9: False promises

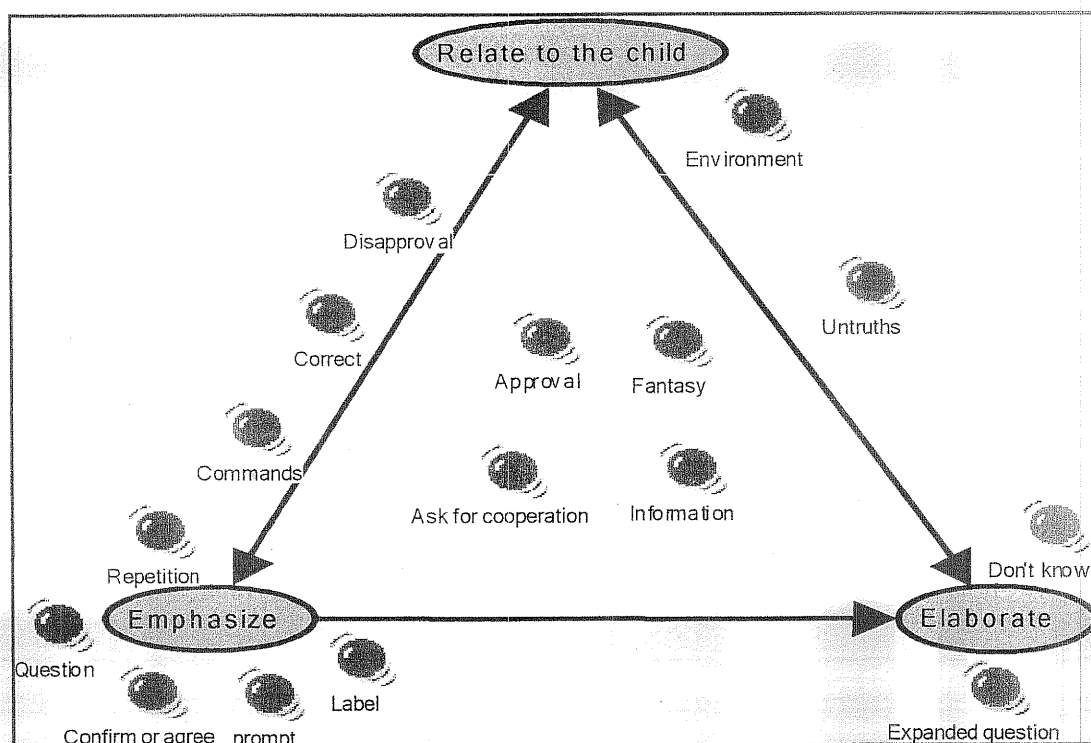
#### *Group 1 dyad*

- G Mother : Samu don't you like to talk? Talk to me I'll buy you sweets. Do you understand?
- Child : These?
- G Mother : Yes, tell me who these people are? We'll go by car to buy sweets in Underberg.
- Child : Are we going ride in that one? (pointing at the car parked in their yard)
- G Mother : No, we are going to get into that white one, the white lady's one. Do you see it?
- Child : nodding his head.

#### *Group 1 dyad*

- Mother : Mmmh? Talk so that aunt will buy you danone. . . . Talk, just look, I told you to take a handkerchief and you ignored me. You are not sick, are you? She wont give you an injection. She'll give you delicious things. Aunt will give you delicious things. . . Say it. Mimi, Mimi, say it sisi. Say 1, 2, 3 children. Say that and aunt will buy and bring you danone tomorrow. . . They are not going to give you an injection. You are not sick. They wont do anything to you. Granny will go for an injection. Do you und erstand that? Mmh? . . . Show me the house so that you'll go with Sqgebhe's aunt to see Sqgebhe in Durban. Here are stones, beautiful ones. Here are others and there are trees, point Mimi, so that aunt will leave the book for you.

Figure 5: Strategies for mediation



## CAREGIVER'S UTTERANCES

We examined the way in which the three groups used these communication tools by coding each caregiver's utterance into the following codes:

Information:	The caregiver gives the child information about the picture or concepts being discussed with respect to the picture.
Label:	Labelling objects in the picture.
Question:	A simple question where both participants know what the answer is, or where the answer is of the yes/no type. The intention is often to draw attention to an aspect of the picture or to inform the child about the picture.
Question with expansion:	The question is designed to elicit cognitive input from the child.
Prompt	The caregiver encourages the child to respond to a question, usually by saying "Mmmm?" interrogatively.
Ask for co-operation:	The caregiver gives the child a command designed to focus attention on the task at hand. Some examples are to look at the picture, or to speak louder.
Approval:	The caregiver congratulates the child on his/her response(s).
Disapproval	The caregiver criticises the child.
Confirm	The caregiver confirms what the child has said.
Correct	The caregiver corrects the child's response.
Repetition	The caregiver repeats either one of her own utterances or one of the child's. This may serve as a prompt or a confirmation, but often is



an indication that the caregiver is running out of ideas, or is using a didactic approach.

Counts of the various codes gives a picture of their relative popularity. Thus Simple Questions were the most frequently utilised, along with Information statements, Repetition, Expanded Questions and Confirmation of the child's responses. Feedback in terms of approval, disapproval and correcting the child's statements were used infrequently. This pattern probably reflects a cultural style.

Table 9: Communication codes

	Group 1 n=10 Mean no. of codes	Group 2 n=10 Mean no. of codes	Group 3 n=12 Mean no. of codes
Information	14	16	24
Label	4	4	7
Simple Question	20	20	32
Expanded Question	13	18	21
Prompt	3	4	7
Ask for co-operation	7	7	7
Disapproval	0	1	1
Correct	1	1	2
Confirm	9	10	18
Approval	0	0	1
Repetition	12	11	22
All codes	81	91	141

Group 3 caregivers find more to say about the pictures than caregivers in either of the other two groups, and this is the case for all codes except *Ask for Co-operation* and *Disapproval*. Presumably Group 3 caregivers are able to engage children in discussing the pictures without resorting to demands for their attention. Probably their comments are more interesting to the children, and the Group 3 children are more accustomed to talking about pictures with their caregivers. The difference between the Group 3 caregivers and the less experienced groups thus lies more in the content, fluency and frequency of their interactions than in utilising any special strategies to capture attention.

In this analysis Group 2 caregivers score between Group 1 and Group 3 on *Information*, *Expanded Question*, *Prompt* and *Confirm*, and also have a somewhat higher total number of codes than Group 1 members. This probably indicates that they are becoming more confident about their ability to inform and teach children.

Overt expressions of approval in such statements was relatively rare in all groups. Some examples were:

"Good you're so grown up now because you can now see the hill, a house and stones."

"Mmm, you are clever."

"Wow! Ish tana."

However, confirmatory statements and sounds ("Mmmm") were commonly used to signal approval. This was particularly so for Group 3 caregivers.

"Yes, the one wearing beads".

"Hah! You've seen it properly".

"Yes, these are girls".

Repetition of the child's response was also used to signal confirmation and approval.

#### Conversation box 10: Repetition used as confirmation and approval

*Group 3 dyad*

GMother : What are you going to draw? Mmmm? What do you draw at the pre-school? Just tell me what you draw there.

Child : I draw circles.

GMother : What do you draw?

Child : I draw circles.

GMother : What?

Child : Circles.

GMother : Circles.

Child : Yes.

GMother : What else?

Child : And strokes.

GMother : And strokes

Child : Yes.

GMother : What else?

Child : And A [vowel a]

GMother : And A .

## HANDLING BOOKS

As might be expected, caregivers from the literacy groups spent more time on average looking at the picture book than control group dyads. They pointed to the picture more and their bodies were more often oriented to the children as they examined the pictures together. The analysis of this section of the data was designed to distinguish between supportive and directive teaching strategies.

In order to see whether the children were familiar with books, and whether the caregivers were supportive as opposed to directive during this early experience with literacy, the child was handed a book upside-down and the wrong way round. In the ideal case where a caregiver/child dyad is well practiced in looking at books together, the child would turn the book, and the caregiver would then help support the book as the child looks at it. If the child did not turn the book, the caregiver would turn it and then assist the child to hold it.

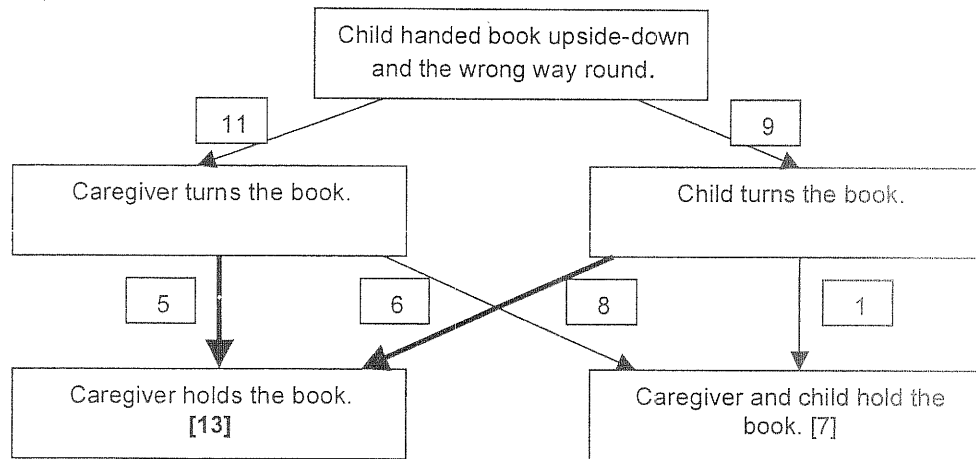
Figure 6: Handling books



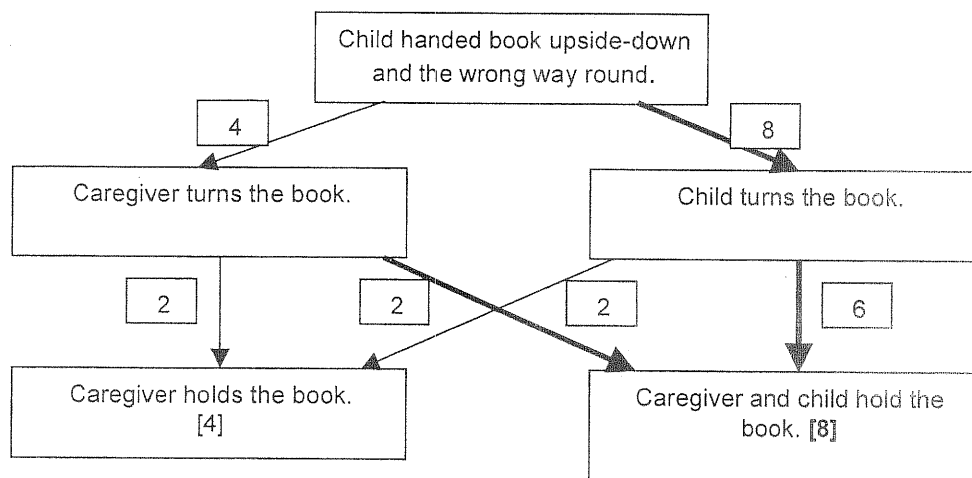
The dyads in Groups 1 and 2 showed a similar distribution of strategies with an even distribution of caregivers and children turning the book, and a preponderance of caregivers taking control of the book thereafter. What distinguishes the Group 3 caregivers is the evidence of scaffolding in the sense that the caregiver only intervenes when the child has had a chance to turn the book, and has not understood that this needs to be done. The Group 3 caregivers allowed the child time to make the correct adjustments, and assisted with holding the book rather than taking it away from the child in order to hold it. This is represented diagrammatically in Figure 5 below.

Figure 7: Different strategies for handling books

Groups 1 and 2



Group 3



## DRAWING

In the final data collection section, the children were given a drawing book and crayons and asked to draw something. The behavioural analysis for this section was concerned with the question of whether Group 3 caregivers behaved any differently from other caregivers in terms of supporting or directing behaviour, and whether Group 3 children appeared more at ease with this situation.

Caregivers opened the packet of crayons and selected crayons for the children to use in all three groups, and we could not detect any systematic differences in allowing the child to choose colours or to open the book. In most instances the caregiver took the lead. There did, however appear to be a difference in the drawings. About half of the children in all groups did some scribbling, but eleven out of the twelve Group3 children drew houses, people, other objects and letters as well, compared with 6 out of 10 in Group 2 and only 3 out of 10 in Group 1.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM THE OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

- In the discussions about the two pictures Group 3 children spoke more frequently, and their caregivers used more content themes in discussing the pictures with them. In contrast to other groups, Group 3 discussed pictures per se, and introduced more objects into their observations. All groups talked about counting, but dyads in Groups 2 and 3 spoke about a variety of other educational topics in addition, and Group 3 caregivers were the only ones to talk about naming colours.
- Four central and positive strategies were identified which assisted caregivers in emphasizing aspects of the materials, elaborating on them and relating them to children's own experience and interests: expressions of approval, fantasy games, giving out information and asking for co-operation. Some Group 1 caregivers used the counterproductive strategy of making false promises to children of rewards if they complied on the task. Praise was not used overtly but was inherent in other constructs (such as confirming or repeating what the child was saying).
- The difference between the Group 3 caregivers and the less experienced groups lay in the content, fluency and frequency of their interactions.
- In the handling of books it was apparent that Group 3 caregivers gave support when necessary, and were less directive.
- All caregivers did more for the children than was necessary to prepare for drawing (opening the box of crayons and selecting colours), but Group 3 children produced a greater variety of drawings, probably indicating that they had had more experience with pictures.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The caregivers who had been members of literacy groups the longest showed considerable skill and enthusiasm for engaging children in discussions which would extend their knowledge and understanding of the world around them. The newcomers to literacy groups already display some of these attitudes and skills, although to a lesser extent. This progress is clearly of great importance in the lives of rural women and children, and it is hoped that project will continue to expand and develop.

The authors of this report recommend the following:

More varied and challenging content of materials for the literacy groups to allow a greater range of topics to be covered.

More discussion within the groups about children's potential to practise literary skills from an early age.

Affirmation of caregivers achievements to date.

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