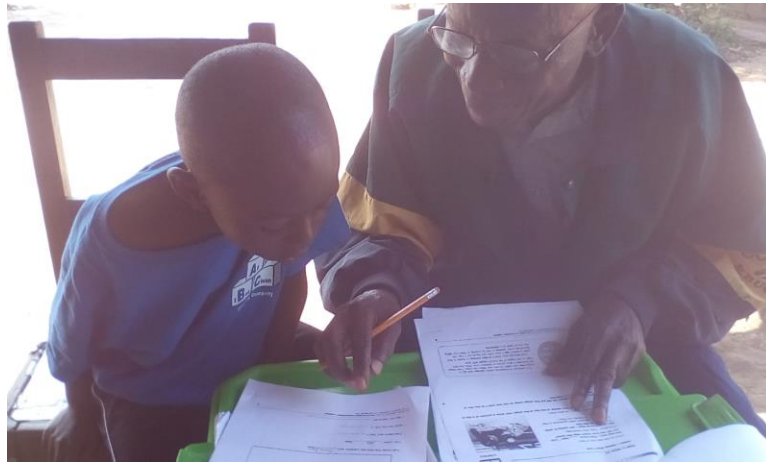


The FOL WE-CARE Family Literacy Initiative August, 2017

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My trip to Liberia in August, 2017, sponsored by FOL, included visits to Duazon, in Margibi County, and Caldwell and West Point in Montserrado County. My purpose was to see the FOL/WE CARE/HIPPY Family Literacy Initiative in action, to see home visitors training parents or other caregivers, and to see those who were trained helping their pre-school age children to prepare for school reading, writing, and numeracy. I wanted to see if parents encouraged their child's curiosity and expanded their knowledge of the natural and home-based environment as preparation for learning about science. I was also interested in the physical environment in which the "parent-as-a-child's-first-teacher" took place. I wondered if the parents themselves could read, if they had basic cellphones with text messaging, if they and their children had enough food to eat, if parents living in poverty had room in their lives of struggle to teach their children. I wondered if the Family Literacy Initiative home visitors had been well trained, if they had enough experience to be effective in training the parents. I wondered how they related to the communities in which they worked. I wondered if community and religious leaders saw this program as useful to their community, and if parents and children wanted to continue in the program into the next year. I also wondered if any of the parents saw a need to improve their own reading, writing and numeracy skills. The project has an evaluation team, led by experienced education program evaluator and FOL member, Ron Mertz; although I am a member of that team, in this case my role was not as a formal program evaluator, but rather as an informal observer.

Background on the Family Literacy Initiative

FOL initiated the idea of a program to help Liberian families improve their literacy and numeracy, beginning with helping pre-school children get ready to enter school at the right age and prepared to be successful students, and FOL has taken the lead in raising funds for the program. WE CARE is a well-respected Liberian non-governmental organization that provides in-country leadership, and operates the program. HIPPY, The Home Instruction for Parents of Pre-school Youth, many years ago created a home visitor school readiness parent-training model and an accompanying materials kit. WE CARE developed the idea of storing the HIPPY materials, along with the children's books, in large, durable, waterproof plastic boxes, that are given to families to help parents help their children learn. While HIPPY is an international program, this is its first time in West Africa. The Family Literacy Initiative is at the end of its second year, and is seeking funds for the third year of the three-year program.

Observations

While each of the three communities has unique qualities, I will share examples of what I saw that appeared common to all three. Many of the parents or other caregivers I met were poor, although not the “poorest of the poor” as homeless and street people are sometimes referred to. What I saw as ranged from “hand-to-mouth-poor” to “poor but with some resources” to a few families, where a parent was working full-time that might have been doing a little better, but not much. Every family had a small house, sometimes with a porch, but not always a cement block house; more than half of the families, I was told, had houses whose walls were made of zinc or mats; a home that was not invulnerable to the damages of rainy season storms. One father I observed, a man close to my own advanced age, was helping his child to learn to read. Except for the home visitor training and the HIPPY materials, he had had no training to teach. Yet, I saw in him a caring parent with a gentle way of teaching his child and encouraging his child’s curiosity to learn, that made me wish he had been a teacher so that many more children could benefit from his natural teaching gifts. His son appeared to be near school entry age, but not yet in school. I saw the child recognize his name in print and then write it. Then I saw him answer questions about the activities and reading for the week. I believed that it wouldn’t be long before he would be able to read, but I was wrong; he could already read the books in his plastic home library box. His father proudly pulled out one of the books, and his son read it to me. Clearly he would enter school as a top student, if not the best in his class. I wondered if his new school teacher would be thrilled to find a child who would be so successful, or terrified that the lessons she had prepared for the class would bore him. At the end of the observation visit, the father mentioned that sometimes it was difficult to focus on teaching his child, that the previous week for example a fierce storm had taken the roof off his house, and that the flying roof had also injured his son.



I saw several other one-on-one trainings of parents that went as planned; but we also arrived to find a parent who could not work with her home visitor because she had a painful toothache. There is no dentist in her community. She looked like she was worried about what to do. We learned that another parent in that community could not meet with her home visitor because the night before her small store had been robbed. The project co-coordinator and I stopped by to offer our condolences. The parent was a small shopkeeper. Her family’s livelihood, especially as she was a single parent, depended solely on

her shop, and the rogue (the word is especially applicable when poor people are robbed), took everything she had. As she told us about the robbery, tears streamed down her face.

Nearly every family was working on the same HIPPY unit, number 29 out of 30 for the year. A few parents were behind a lesson or two, usually due to an interruption in their life such as a sick child or other family member, or in one case, the death of a brother. The HIPPY units were sometimes focused on excellent children's books, although none of the books that I saw were by Liberian authors. There were always activities that the parent was to do with their child. I met fathers and mothers, and sometime tag teams of trained parents, who alternated working with their child. I also met school-aged siblings who were able to read, caregivers who substituted for parents. In these activities parents are asked to do everything themselves that they will ask their child to do, ranging from pointing to and naming the colors of plastic geometric shapes, cutting out and gluing shapes that represent circles, triangles, squares and rectangles; and making "play dough" in a family mixing bowl out of flour, water, and oil. I also saw parents gleefully jumping, hopping and skipping, usually counting out loud while they moved and, although some may have felt a little silly, they understood that they were role-playing what they would do with their child.



One activity involved making patterns. I saw a mixture of objects such as spoons, forks or knives that the family provided, or that the home visitor brought, together with leaves, twigs, stones, and palm kernels found near the house. Parents – and, in turn, their children – were asked to make repeating patterns with the objects as a numeracy preparation activity, such as: stone, leaf, rock, kernel; stone, leaf, rock, kernel. I wondered if a parent understood the concept "pattern" so after she did the activity I pointed to the clothesline near her house and asked, "Can you make a pattern with these clothes?" She was surprised by the question, but in a few moments she said, "shirt, pants, blouse; shirt, pants blouse." She got it, and seemed to think it was a good idea to ask her child the same question after they did the activity together.

In all the communities, working with a parent, the home visitors role played the activities that the parent would do with their child during the week. Generally the home visitor played the parent, and the parent played the child. In one visit, however, the home visitor, working with a parent who could read

well, reversed the roles. The home visitor played the child. I thought that was a great idea for when a parent can read well enough.

A home visitor was working with a parent on a “kitchen chemistry” activity, mixing home-made play dough. The home visitor did not read the lesson out loud, sentence by sentence, but instead talked through the main points, and then they did the activities together. He encouraged the parent to let the child be creative, to make whatever animals the child wanted out of the play dough. The mother and her husband are a team in this effort, and they trade off helping their son. Before I left her, the parent said she wanted to thank me – FOL really – for bringing this program to her community, that it has helped her and her family.



I asked how it has helped, expecting to hear, as other parents had said to me, that it prepares their children for school, but she said, “This program has helped me to become closer to my son. He likes doing these HIPYPY activities with me. He looks forward to doing them. I think he likes them better than playing.”