

How Schools Perpetuate Illiteracy

To break the cycle of illiteracy—how “the poor get poorer”—schools must help parents understand how to help their children at home.

LA VERGNE ROSOW

“What’s this word?” 9-year-old Mitzi asked her mother.

“What word?”
“This one,” she said as she crashed her finger down on the first of 10 words she had to do for homework.

“Uh, well, you know you’re supposed to sound it out. Now sound it out.”

“I did! *Do or. Do or. Do or!*” She’d learned her lessons well. “D-o” spells *do* and “o-r” spells *or*. Both child and mother knew how to sound out a word they couldn’t read, and Mitzi was skillful at finding the little words in the big words, too. “How do I make a sentence with ‘do or?’” she asked as she turned over the packet of papers.

“Um, well, I can think of it, but when I try to tell you it, it don’t come out right. Just do the best you can. I’m not supposed to tell you *everything*,” the young mother said, trying to maintain some semblance of dignity before her child.

The little girl turned the packet over again to try the next word. She was supposed to write a sentence with each of the 10 words on the mimeographed list. By Friday, having done each of 4 activities with the words, she was expected to be able to spell all 10 words

When parents and children read together at home, they share memorable experiences, the effects of which carry over into school.

on a test. This was only day 2 of a 4-day homework assignment. (Later Mitzi’s mom explained that just figuring out what the words on the list were was only part of the problem. Then they had to construct sentences that had only words they could already spell. The proposed sentences always grew shorter and shorter as the struggle progressed.) Ten minutes had passed, and Mitzi still hadn’t written the first sentence.

Suddenly she said, “Is it *door?*” and then turned the packet over to start writing.

“Um, no, I don’t think so. I think that’s spelled

another way,” her mother answered thoughtfully.

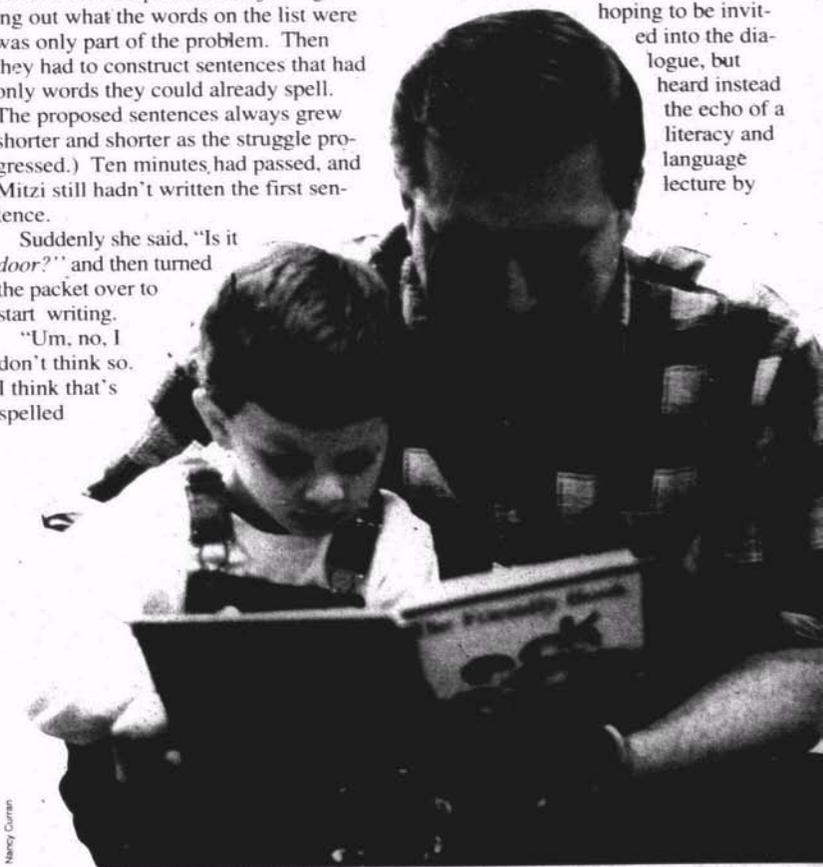
“Well, then, how do you spell *door?*”

“I think it’s d-o-r-e, you know, *dore.*”

A True Life Drama

The little girl seemed to be trying to take in the logic of her mother’s phonetic performance. I leaned forward,

hoping to be invited into the dialogue, but heard instead the echo of a literacy and language lecture by



Nancy Curran

When children of the literate elite need help, their parents can fill in the blanks the school has missed. When children of the print poor need help, they have nowhere to turn.

Steve Krashen on how the rich get richer. Those who are rich in literacy fortify their children with good stories and beautiful books long before they enter school; the poor readers don't even understand that process and so perpetuate illiteracy from generation to generation.² Now, having no invitation to intervene, I was forced to witness this true life drama of what Krashen calls how "the poor get poorer."

Having already repeated the 1st grade, Mitzi was facing the dreaded prospect of failing the 2nd, due to poor performance in language arts. Her mother was an adult nonreader. "I can read the words," she had explained, "but when it comes to explaining it, it's just like a wall goes up, and I can't say what I mean." By a wall going up, I'd immediately figured she was talking about stress, the *Affective Filter*³ that stops learning and performance. But Mitzi's mom meant instead that she couldn't comprehend text. I was there to help her learn to read when Mitzi had come home from school. Not knowing

whether the child knew why I was visiting her mom, and having gotten no introduction, I was not free to move in on the mother/daughter ritual that served only to teach Mitzi that schoolwork is tough and she is never able to do it well.

Krashen had lectured about the ease with which students accustomed to print-rich environments breeze through schoolwork on words they had already learned through pleasure reading. "Those who are readers typically know

what most of the words mean already. They have seen them before, in Judy Blume's novels or in Dungeons and Dragons. . . ."⁴ Meanwhile, children from nonprint homes and classrooms are left to flesh out the loser's end of the bell-shaped curve. When children of the literate elite need help, their parents can fill in the blanks the school has missed. When children of the print poor need help, they have nowhere to turn. The girl who already knows 9 of the 10 assigned spelling words from pleasure reading will make a 100 percent if she studies the 1 unknown word and 90 percent if she does nothing. The girl who can't read will be faced with 10 new words, an almost overwhelming task of memorization. If she really struggles, she'll earn a C-. In school, that is how the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. They'll imagine that if they had just studied a little harder or worked a little longer they would have done better. "And like the victims of child abuse, they blame themselves."⁵ I'd heard the lecture . . . more than once. School is a test . . . to see who already knows the most and to see whose parents can do the best job. Now I was witnessing the demonstration.

From One Generation to the Next

After 30 or 45 minutes of guesswork, Mitzi ran out to play, knowing that her faithful mother would be waiting to help her with another hour and a half of homework when she came in.⁶ She couldn't know that the production of sentences is a test, a call for *output* that shows what the reader already knows; output is simply anything the learner can say or write. Sentence production was not *input* designed to give the new or nonreader information.⁷ Based on what is understandable and relevant to the learner, input becomes acquired without learner effort. Nor could Mitzi's mom know that this assignment was difficult because it employed a bottom-up strategy. It required that the

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learner remember all sorts of meaningless little pieces of the language, like "do," and put them into bigger pieces: sentences. She had been told that if she did this enough, she would know how to spell, and that would then help her reading; in reality, only those students who are already readers can back into this kind of task successfully. She couldn't know that no struggle would have been involved in pulling a part (a word) out of a whole, such as a real story.

For Mitzi and her mom, there was never any storytelling or picture book enjoyment. But because Mitzi's mother was bent on not having her child do poorly in school the way she herself had, night after night, they labored over writing sentences for sounds like "door."

Finally, Mitzi had hit the word *floor*, and when she said it, her mother realized there was a pattern connection. "Yes, now, if that one's *floor*, what's this one?" she asked pointing back to word number one.

"But you said . . ." Mitzi, a very bright child, had already learned in one lesson the spelling "d-o-r-e."

I wondered what if, instead of *floor*, the familiar word had been *look* or *poor* or *boot*. What other reasonable and wrong connection might have been triggered? How many little transfers of poverty occur in the name of homework each night across this land as illiteracy passes from one generation to the next?

Keeping Secrets from the Have-Nots

Who is accountable when all the mothers of all the Mitzis just don't measure up? Without knowing the futility of their efforts and the waste of their scarce funds, how many take the cue from this kind of school assignment and buy grocery store workbooks to occupy what would be pleasure book times for the literate elite?

Why aren't mother and child seeing beautiful pictures in books brought home from school and sharing favorite

Teachers Can Foster Family Literacy

Illiteracy does run in families, but we can end it in our classrooms. And, with funds for extra supplies, books, released time, and help from our schools, K-12 teachers can extend a hand to the parents of the "Mitzi" in our classrooms. We can:

- Make our classrooms examples of "print-rich environments" by providing plenty of books, magazines, posters, and notes.
- Invite parents to story times or other literacy events and help them to enjoy these occasions with their children. Help parents to understand that good questions are designed to stimulate thought, not extract correctness.
- Send books home that we have read to the children. Tell parents that talking about books will help their children learn to appreciate literature.
- Communicate with parents in clear language; find speakers of their languages when they are not proficient in English.
- Tell parents about adult literacy services such as Adult Basic Education and Literacy Volunteer programs. Encourage them to seek help, assuring them that it is never too late to learn to enjoy reading; but forewarn people of possible disappointments like the numbers of months on waiting lists, so that initial problems don't seem like personal affronts.
- Tell parents about local library story hours and services, and invite the librarian to meet them.
- Teach parents how to identify good book features such as: predictable text, Caldecott and Newbery Medalists, their own children's recognition and delight over books made familiar at school. Perhaps a very simple, large-type checklist can help.
- Teach parents not to fall for gro-

cery and drug store workbooks and other skill-level materials. Then point out where they can buy inexpensive books in the neighborhood, such as used book stores, flea markets, library sales, school purchase bargains (Scholastic Books), and chain stores.

- Visit children and parents in their homes to gain insights into their interests. In the process, you may find resources for the entire classroom, such as a parent who can sing folk-songs.

For *homework*, teachers should assign enrichment tasks—not activities that ask students to finish incomplete classroom work, use materials that are not available, or obtain teaching at home when none may be available. Instead, the school-related homework should foster love of learning and build a bridge between classroom activities and life at home. For example, teachers can:

- Encourage children to read nursery rhymes or songbooks already made familiar at school.
- Suggest family projects such as handprint collections or pressed flowers, which will be used for school writing; in turn, the writing projects will then be returned to the home as reading materials.
- Give directions for making finger- and hand-puppets that match poems learned at school, and invite students to roleplay or dramatize stories from home for their classmates at school.

Making school/home connections with the parents of the Mitzis in your classrooms is a tough task—but a very good investment. Breaking the cycle of illiteracy continues to pay off generation after generation. □

—La Vergne Rosow

stories that Mitzi has heard again and again in class instead of impoverished little mimeographs with lists of meaningless words? Who profits when the values of the literate have are kept secret from the illiterate have-nots? Surely we know too much of the reading process to pretend this disparity is created in ignorance. The assignment to sound out "do or" and to produce a sentence from it robs Mitzi of real reading time, but Mitzi doesn't know that. And Mitzi's mother doesn't know that. Can this kind of "literacy lesson" pass as a naive accident in our bountiful domain where consistently "the poor get poorer"?

¹A 1988 survey of adult nonreaders showed that the biggest reason adults seek literacy help is self-esteem. L. Rosow, (November 1988), "Adult Illiterates Offer Unexpected Cues into the Reading Process," *Journal of Reading*: 120-124.

²S. D. Krashen, (1988), USC lecture notes (unpublished).

³Krashen describes the *Affective Filter*, the metaphor for the stress barrier that prevents new information from coming into the brain and appropriate known information from being accessed. S. D. Krashen, (1985), *Inquiries and Insights: Second Language Teaching, Immersion and Bilingual Education, Literacy*, (Hayward, Calif.: Alemany Press, a division of Janus Book Publishers, Inc.), pp. 10-11.

⁴Ibid, p. 108.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Not every nonreading mother is so faithful. The mother of another 9-year-old child, Arthur,

had a thousand important things to keep her from having to face working with her child on school assignments. L. Rosow, (November 1989), "Arthur: A Tale of Disempowerment," *Phi Delta Kappan* 71, 3: 194-199.

⁷For a comprehensive discussion of input vs. output, see S. D. Krashen, (1989), "We Acquire Vocabulary and Spelling by Reading: Additional Evidence for the Input Hypothesis," *Modern Language Journal* 73, IV: 440-464.

Author's note: I am pleased to report that through subsequent tutoring, Mitzi's mother has just finished reading the first book of her life.

I would like to thank Professors David Eskey and William Rideout, Jr., for help with the Mitzi case.

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