Chatterbox and Family Literacy in Trinidad and Tobago

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CONNEXIONS
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Chapter 1

How young Caribbean children learn to talk

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A brief look at some theories.

Within the last few decades theorists have put forward views that children may acquire Language in various ways. Among them is the view that they possess an in-built language device (Chomsky) that will be activated or spring to life by the talk of others around them. Then, there is the cognitive view—Piaget, where "language was simply one of children's ways of representing their familiar worlds, a reflection of thought." Vygotsky's theory, on the other hand was concerned with the relationship between thought and Language. He viewed language first "as social communication", which gradually impacted on both language itself and cognition.

What is relevant here is how these views have caused us as teachers to look at the way we ourselves have acquired speech/Language and how we learn more about this process—even in an informal way, by observing how children talk in our classroom and in our families.

Young children in Home and School settings

CHILDREN GROW into language/talk through acquiring and participating in community interactions and speech scripts. They learn their roles and language in home, school and community settings. Young children test meanings as they learn. They learn the attitudes and values that adhere to language use/spoken and written. *All of this may form a part of "their meaning-making apparatus" which they are developing while they are in pre-school (3-5yrs) and which will affect their literacy development. **The home language is an English-based creole as in the countries of the Commonwealth Caribbean—e.g. Trinidad and Tobago. It is necessary too, to observe and record the "social" nature and value of the talk of young children and see how this can be transposed in learning situations. Will this lead to cognitive gains? See "Chatterbox traits" in this course.

What value does this language have? In the community? in educational settings? *How do pre-school teachers view the home language of their children?

The Language-Literacy Connection

The literacy development of young children (3+ to 5 years) who will speak an English-based creole occurs within a "community language nest" as the children acquire and test meanings. The article on young people, their "Communication Experience" and their Literacy gives a glimpse of the problems many of them encounter in "negotiating meanings in Standard English texts." Beginning to assist them earlier while they are still in preschool, means reducing some of the risks of failure. Young children's literacy development while learning how to talk in community terms forms a part of their search for meaning. This, with an attendant warmth, participation in a print-rich environment, with adequate and positive response during entertaining conversations about texts, role-play and interaction with adults should produce positive results especially in developing and extending their conversation. *Meaningful use of "child chat": in the children’s beginning

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1This content is available online at <http://cnx.org/content/m15161/1.1/>.

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Chapter 1. How Young Caribbean Children Learn To Talk

creole styles and the capability to code-switch as they grow into language, should produce linguistic security as well as confidence in their use of Language and literacy learning. *They should not be locked away into "the proper English-broken English syndrome" that exists. They will learn to switch codes appropriately according to context as they develop and this can foster intellectual expansion and growth as well. These are just predictions that should help stem the later "at risk slide" into educational oblivion for some of our young people. Meaningful use of child chat though, in this context should enhance ability. All this might not be mere speculation on the writer’s part but it should be researched as the questions below suggest.

Some Questions: Unique topics **Ways of looking at chatterbox and how child talk develops in a Creole-type community of speakers. **Chatterbox as a phase of early language learning–has to be described. What are the tools for doing this? What precedents? **Chatterbox and the prevailing attitudes to home-language in pre-school settings in Trinidad and Tobago. *Suggestions for the chatterbox-literacy connection in the light of (i) the challenge for intellectual growth (??) and (ii) Roles of teachers and parents.

The above are burning questions about factors and patterns in child language and Literacy that can affect learning and only research can open the doors to the answers we seek.
Chapter 2

Chatterbox and Early Literacy in Trinidad and Tobago

Re-working and updating a number of our Literacy modules
This year (2011) we plan to update a number of our Literacy modules including this one. Students (prospective teachers), follow us carefully and send your ideas for teaching Early Literacy.

For the purposes of this module/article, "chatterbox" refers to a young child who talks incessantly. Attached to the meaning of this term is cuteness and the sheer parroting of words that is not grounded in the ability of the young children to make meaning when they talk. There still exists a notion (here in Trinidad and Tobago, at least) that "a child should be seen and not heard", and a lack of understanding on the part of many caregivers, teachers and parents of the NECESSARY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY LITERACY LEARNING especially so in Caribbean creole-speaking environments among children who face the at-risk-literacy threat. Here we discuss what the literature says about this link and we will suggest ways of how it can be harnessed in our chatterbox youngsters for Literacy learning.

This module targets teachers and parents of young preschool age children. It will describe and lay out for discussion:

1. Who or what is a "chatterbox" and attitudes to chatterbox children
2. Oral Language and Early Literacy
3. Making Meaningful use of Child Chat as a Resource for Early Literacy in a Creole-speaking environment
4. Points to share with regard to developing Early Literacy
5. Helping parents and teachers to shape chatterbox in a productive not a dismissive manner.
6. It seems as though we have raised more questions than we have answers for: much research is needed.

1. CHATTERBOX CHILDREN are quite "glib" according to community norms. Not a few (both boys and girls) are early talkers i.e. talking well at least by age 3 years. Their verbalizations are regarded by some adults with delight as they attempt conversation and use new words in surprising ways. On the other hand, "chatterbox" may carry a nuance value where the child's talking "out of turn" and frequent question-asking may annoy or embarrass adults whose response to this is to silence the child or shut him/her up. If this last measure occurs too often it could have the effect of the child responding with silence in important situations where they are required to talk. It could also have a negative impact on their attempts at Literacy learning.

There are two (2) strands of thought in this module that we will consider viz. (1) That child Language and early Reading research literature is replete with evidence that Oral language facility is an advantage for

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1This content is available online at <http://cnx.org/content/m14714/1.25/>.

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the transition from language acquisition to Literacy. (2) Chatterbox children in Trinidad and Tobago belong primarily to Trinidian Creole-speaking environments. They themselves are budding speakers of Creole English which is their home language. And instead of this being a negative attribute to be "eradicated" early, the children's creole-speaking capabilities and willingness to experiment can be a plus in their learning both to speak and to read Standard English text.

2. A brief look at some aspects of the Literature on ORAL LANGUAGE AND EARLY LITERACY:

CHILDREN GROW into language/talk through acquiring and participating in community interactions and speech scripts. They learn their roles and language in home, school and community settings. "Children acquire scripts (sequences of actions and words) from various interactions with people...and the adults in their families and communities structure these scripts for children to help them to learn. Gradually children internalize the adult rules for making meaning" (Bowman, 1989). Young children test meanings as they learn. They learn the attitudes and values that adhere to language use /spoken and written. All of this may form a part of "their meaning-making apparatus" which they are developing while they are in pre-school (3-5yrs) and which will affect their Literacy development.

With regard to the Oral Language-Literacy link, this comment by Catherine O’Callagan in a Review of the Handbook of Early Literacy (2001)² gives ample evidence of a positive relationship between the two: "The Handbook on Early Literacy Research reiterates the findings that a key factor in successful early literacy acquisition is immersion in a rich oral language environment. Rita Watson in ‘Literacy and Oral Language: Implications for Early Literacy Acquisition’ presents a new argument for its importance by stating that the relationship between oral language and Literacy is bidirectional. As children are exposed to different text in shared readings, read alouds or show and tell, they develop an understanding for different forms of discourse. These new conceptualizations of text become the foundation for metalanguage and critical thinking. Watson concludes that participating in communicative events facilitates the acquisition of competence to succeed in Literacy in school. Development of this communicative competence through immersion in oral language becomes an important building block for early success in Literacy."

3. MAKING MEANINGFUL USE OF CHILD CHAT: Writing from my experience with young children and ECCE teachers during the last 15 years, this writer "predicts" that the Literacy development of young children who will speak an English-based creole occurs within a "community language nest" as the children acquire and test meanings and that their Literacy learning forms a part of their search for meaning. Productive use of their chat in their beginning creole styles coupled with hearing Standard English being read to them from entertaining texts, will increase their capability to grow into Language with conversation, interaction during texts and role play. They should not be locked away in the "proper-English-broken English" syndrome that is so pervasive in our society.

4. DEVELOPING EARLY LITERACY: In the Caribbean we face some challenges with regard to developing programs in Early Literacy. However, some of the areas that teachers should pay attention to are: Phonemic and phonological awaremess³, Reading to children ⁴ (using books with multicultural themes) and talking with them in ways to bring their chat skills to bear on texts and events that will enlarge their experience.

Researchers in Early Literacy (Dickinson and Tabors,2001; Snow, Burns and Griffin,1998) have identified early reading behaviors that make for success in reading. These are oral language development, phonemic awareness and being exposed to the alphabet. Parental involvement in these activities at home is important. Phonemic awareness is acquired through nursery rhymes,jingles, poetry and words that contain alliteration. Reading from books assists which language development and mastery of the concepts of print. Oral language development can also be achieved through having extended meaningful conversations with the children. In addition to the above, activities that are particularly useful for developing skills in children are: *Story telling and listening to stories, *Songs and music-related activities, *Talking about (sharing) their everyday and unique experiences.

5. Helping parents and teachers to use chatterbox as a Literacy resource: Is it that every child must

²http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev139.htm
³http://reading.uoregon.edu/pa/pa_teach.php
⁴http://icdlbooks.org

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be "turned into" a chatterbox then? This wouldn't be necessary at all, because the remarkable oral chat capability is not a part of the repertoire of all children. However, this can be harnessed by skilful teachers in the pre-school setting for example to draw more reluctant talkers into a chat circle while connecting listening and book reading to chatting in small groups. Accept of the home language of parents and their children without question and without engendering feelings of embarrassment. Share with both parents and teachers about the acceptable uses of speech in your school setting. It is necessary to discuss with parents how to extend the conversation of their young children—especially when they are prone to persistent question-asking. How to respond to the children in public places e.g. the supermarket, the mall, at church and the doctor’s office, without "roughing them" into silence because the parents are embarrassed by their talk and cannot find the time or patience to respond. Also teach young children about turn taking and when is the appropriate time to talk. Help parents to show the young ones how to recognize environmental print and to read and chat meaningfully with them regularly. Tell parents that it is "okay" if the little ones want to sprawl on the floor and pretend to be reading books and newspapers. And it is not stupidity when the children recognize little words in the newspapers and yet show a reluctance to read these same little words in their first basal readers. It is "okay" too to talk in Creole English. They will be led easily into learning Standard English structures without strain and through dramatic play. There is so much more but parents should make these "sharing" moments a special time for the little ones—moments full of warmth and positive reinforcement. Eventually we will draw up a whole programme for parents and teachers on this aspect of chatterbox but much research is needed on what one may call "chatterbox traits" or the talk structures that most young children use among themselves and with adults.

Some questions for further research: *Where the children's home language is an English-based creole as in Trinidad and Tobago* *What value does this language have? In the community? in educational settings? *How do preschool teachers view the home language of their children? *What are the literacy teaching practices in selected preschools? *What does Literacy development entail? *What use is made of oracy in the preschool curriculum? *How do teachers deal with chatterbox children? *Are boys more inclined to be chatterboxes than girls? *What is the participation of young boys in Literacy activities at home and in the preschool setting? So then chatterbox is not merely nuisance talking in young children. They are trying to make sense of their world and it is a good time to help them by being their chatting and reading partner.

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Chapter 3

Chatterbox "traits": A T&T Early Literacy research focus

- The Oral Language - Early Literacy basis
- Action research methods that were used to discover Language-Literacy patterns: "chatterbox traits"
- Why a study of chatterbox "traits" in children is important
- How these "traits" may be used productively in home and educational settings
- A Chatterbox an early talker, an early reader?
- MORE RESEARCH is needed in order to "flesh out" some of the above sub topics with appropriate information

ORAL LANGUAGE IS A BASIS FOR EARLY LITERACY: CHILDREN GROW into language/talk through acquiring and participating in community interactions and speech scripts. They learn their roles and language in home, school and community settings. Children acquire scripts (sequences of actions and words) from various interactions with people...and the adults in their families and communities structure these scripts for children to help them to learn. Gradually children internalize the adult rules for making meaning" (Bowman, 1989). Young children test meanings as they learn. They learn the attitudes and values that adhere to language use /spoken and written. All of this may form a part of "their meaning-making apparatus" which they are developing while they are in pre-school (3-5yrs) and which will affect their Literacy development. 

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In this section I wish to share SOME VERY BASIC ACTION RESEARCH METHODS which describe how I did what I did to observe and intervene in the Literacy development of the two children. 

I visited with them mainly on afternoons and on some nights when I stayed over at "our house" called "Grandma’s house". My mother (70+ at the time of this

1This content is available online at <http://cnx.org/content/m14715/1.11/>.
2<http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev139.htm>

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project) kept them while their parents were at work. I made notes of their sayings especially those that related to literacy. I made audio tapes of them in conversation with myself and their parents. Like all children of that age, they had a tremendous passion for play and we regularly visited my own home where I read books and stories aloud to them and where they made a lot of mess with paper, crayons and glue. I chatted with them and they used their "budding" Trinidadian Creole; we shared snacks, tv shows and went often to the supermarket, the post office and the play park—all of this when they were between 2 and 5/6 years old, that is, from 1993 to 1997. Camille (cousin to Angela) came to stay with us when she was two (2).

*I wanted to eliminate the rough, "licks" aspect of literacy learning with children in a home environment and I was curious to see how young children "connected with" Reading. "Grandpa"—my own father now also 70++—participated actively in their literacy-at-home and had an influence in surprising and unlooked for ways—all this now without "licks". *Sometimes I became a child with them and had to switch roles as auntie, playmate and teacher. Together with their parents I saw them through the joys and anxieties of entry into preschool and primary school as well as through their bouts of fever and colds. There was too, their participation in festivals, birthdays and family get togethers. The two moved rapidly through their own language development in this creole-speaking home. **Reading aloud was the basis of their at-home literacy learning. Both parents (Sheila and Slim) read aloud to them regularly and chatted with them after work on evenings while they all cooled out in a relaxed fashion (called "liming") watching tv. *Telling them stories before they fell asleep was another feature of this project. Both their parents and I made up stories or sang songs which made us laugh and they'd fall asleep sometimes in the middle of the story. *Angela "demanded" repeatedly..."Tell me how it was long time..." or "Tell me about..." a particular story, or family event or member. And their language grew. They seem to want to hear the same story repeatedly. They had stacks of picture books and heaps of toys that relatives living in the U.S. sent for them. I saw my assistance as supplementary to their preschool program. They interacted also with a host of other adults in "Grandma's house"—other uncles, aunts and cousins. They "wrote" all over the place...in the concrete yard with chalk and on huge sheets of paper with fat pencils and crayons. They repeated rhymes and stories they learned at school, sang their songs and had their pretend games with colourful toys and dolls and they chatted their way through all of this, an endless stream of chat with as much positive response as we the adults could muster. Having them chat in an uninhibited fashion and by our responding to this positively—although their parents and I were really tired many times—appears to have been a factor that fuelled their growth and confidence in language and literacy in this setting—"Grandma's house". They were indeed chatterboxes. I interviewed their parents and nine other adults on their observations about this "chatterbox-in-literacy" phenomenon. I hope larger sample of children, especially with very young boys ("boy chirrun") can be studied, since there is an urgent need for this here in Trinidad and Tobago at the present time.

These "traits" are simply bits of discourse of young Trinidad and Tobago children (3-5 years). They are not "cute sayings" but terms for structured talk that came out of the observations of the two (2) "girl children" I studied roughly 10 years ago. If anything the terms and their description illustrate the children's way of dealing with their social environment and the adults who inhabit it.

If we as teachers and parents know how rapid and complex the language learning of young children is, we will be less likely to be dismissive of their efforts and will see rather how they try to integrate the "new" with the "known" in order to make meaning. "Maren Aukerman, an assistant professor at Penn GSE, poses this question in a recent issue of "The Reading Teacher." Her article argues that "social" language and "academic" language are inextricably interwoven. Thus, children—including second-language learners—will draw on what is familiar to make sense of what they are learning in school." Should we not then investigate what is "familiar" to/with our young language users?

Here then are the traits/bits of structured talk which may be useful in the development of Early Literacy in Trinidad and Tobago. In a subsequent section I'll describe briefly how I did what I did in order to see these traits and their link to the children's early at home Literacy efforts.

These traits occurred during talk over Literacy materials and just keeping company activities with the two girls over a four year period. The idea was to usher them gently into Literacy in a home setting without the harshness of making it look like work. Instead the effort produced moments of great fun. The kinds of speech acts/traits listed below all offer possibilities for using/developing talk with children with text and
beginning writing in order to make the tasks meaningful and enjoyable. A few of them will be fleshed out with examples. It is necessary to see these traits and their link to the children’s early at-home Literacy efforts.

- Telling made-up stories
- Relating/Narrating—saying what happened
- Practising Reading—pretending to read
- Practising being adult—e.g. scolding or quarrelling
- Pretend talk and talking to oneself
- Enacting a role
- Question-asking
- Responding to questions
- Making jokes e.g. talking in opposites—if the adult scolds saying "You are bad." The reply is the opposite (giggling) "No I’m good."
- Teasing
- Calling (an adult) sweet names
- CHATTING: playing "big"—"making conversation like a big girl"
- Dealing verbally with making a mistake—very important
- Talking on the telephone
- Praying
- Singing, dancing, composing
- Shouting
- Being quiet, being silent
- talking in "twang"—imitating sophisticated speech
- Lots of laughter and giggling—some sadness tears too

Example 3.1
"MAKIN CONVERSATION LIKE A BIG GIRL..." Even though the media for viewing and listening is good (t.v. etc) chatting to be heard is irreplaceable for the communication of the ideas of children. "Grandma" referred in a complimentary fashion (even though she was busy) to this chatting need/behavior in the two girls: "making conversation like a big girl..." I believe that this "making conversation " in the language and the appropriate participation structures they glean from their social environment is one of the best Literacy teaching tools/gifts that we can use with our children here in the Caribbean who come from a creole-speaking background and who will be labelled "at risk"—if only we knew how to use it." ...from the author’s notes

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Chapter 4

Family Literacy in a Caribbean Context—some critical issues

This module targets teachers and interested adults. Our students and visitors can visit our Links to Literacy page/links section to read the sites that are listed in order to understand some terms and concepts in the field. Read esp. Gadsden on "Current areas of interest in Family Literacy".

- Definition of Family Literacy
- Family Structure—roles and relations
- The role of parents especially fathers
- Models of Family Literacy Programmes and why a programme of Family Literacy is important—A CULTURAL APPROACH

There is a plethora of family literacy programs in the United States and Canada and some of these have been in existence for two decades or more. They cater for diverse populations—mainly those in the lower socioeconomic bracket. Here in Trinidad and Tobago there is a call once more for attention to be paid to Literacy teaching and learning especially among school age young people. There are plans on the gov’t’s drawing board for a national literacy policy. Some consideration in this should be given to developing a family literacy program (since I know of none that is in existence at the present time). This should be an adequate complement to the recently developed (new) Early Childhood program. The development and operation of successful Family Literacy programs in the U.S. and Canada can serve as a guide. The most important theme though, should be the unique cultures and Language experience of Caribbean peoples.

A Note on Family Structure:

Caribbean families come in many shapes, sizes and hues (ethnicity). In Trinidad and Tobago, the predominant ethnic groups are Indo and African descended peoples whose family patterns and structures have been shaped by the social history of the region. Where some Indian families may have a more "stable" family structure, many African descended families are more matriarchal (female-headed). Among the lower socioeconomic groups they are further characterized by the absence of fathers. No doubt this can impact negatively on Literacy practices in home and community. It is one of the MAIN ISSUES that educators and policy makers must address in devising any programs for Literacy and families.

Definition of Family Literacy:

A definition of family literacy may include the ways in which parents, and children form relationships around sharing the reading and writing of texts at home as well as "children’s acquisition of knowledge about the conventions and purposes of print and the uses of Language in culturally organized activities."

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1This content is available online at <http://cnx.org/content/m14716/1.22/>.
2http://www.freewebe.uni40/linksoliteracy.htm

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CHAPTER 4. FAMILY LITERACY IN A CARIBBEAN CONTEXT—SOME CRITICAL ISSUES

(Wasik, 2001 cited in Gadsden, 2004). It is also related to the Literacy training of parents where this could lead to a better economic position and improved self-sufficiency.

**The Role of Parents especially Fathers:** In Trinidad and Tobago the absence of fathers (those in "visiting" relationships) creates some negative psychological effects upon their children in poor families. Many fathers feel themselves incapable of participating meaningfully in the home and school life of their "outside" children because of economic and other reasons. But fathers’ participation in the at-home Literacy development of young children must be encouraged especially where boys are concerned.

While mothers in such families are closer to their children, and in many instances are the sole breadwinners, because of busy schedules and the lack of literacy skills, they are not as involved in the home-school link as they should be.

Others have migrated for economic reasons leaving the children in the care of guardians or grandparents—usually grandmothers. "Stuff" (material needs in barrels) is shipped regularly to them. But educators have questioned how this replaces care, affection and motherly love; also the much-needed attention to school life and Literacy learning. The term "barrel children" has evolved to describe these children.

HOWEVER, THE "POSITIVES" IN SOCIAL RELATIONS IN HOMES AND COMMUNITIES CAN BE WOVEN EFFECTIVELY INTO FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMMES USING CULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE "THEMES" WHICH CAN BOTH ENCOURAGE THE PARTICIPATION OF FATHERS AND OFFSET THE "NEGATIVES".

CULTURAL "CONVERSATIONAL STRANDS/THEMES": It is possible to introduce and translate into usable, enjoyable formats—through a variety of multimedia, "scripts" occurring in local communicative situations or speech events and based on the participation patterns/structures in which these are done in the community. These may form but one COMPONENT of your Family Literacy or Adult Literacy programme and can be used for many purposes e.g. learning to read and write, problem-solving, learning Standard English and how to interact with other adults and children. Because of the drama and high entertainment value involved in producing this kind of material, young fathers may be attracted to participate in Literacy programmes.

Models of Family Literacy:

Wendy Schwartz examined a number of factors which contribute to effective Family Literacy programmes in the United States. Among them are programmes that "focus on strategies for reaching families that reflect the strengths they already have." She also saw programmes with a cultural focus as being strong and meaningful for parent participation.

Various models of family have evolved in the United States. Many of these target low income families. One such model is the Kenan model (late 1980’s). The goal was to break the cycle of illiteracy by having parents attend adult Literacy classes and have play and school time participation with their children at the same time these were at school.

( The Kenan Model )

Another widely used model is the Even Start series of programmes:

"Family literacy services" means services provided to participants on a voluntary basis that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family, and that integrate all of the following activities:: Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children. Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children. Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency. An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences."

Taken from Even Start Family site.

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**FROM CHATTERBOX TO OLD TALK: Including local scripts when developing Literacy programmes.**

For young children this is a most necessary practice. In homes of extended families where there are many adults and older siblings, it appears that young children grow into talk very quickly as they acquire what we may call Chatterbox traits (Chapter 3) or the oracy talkative young children practice in interaction with others and to make sense of the world around them. These elements of the discourse of the young could also be harnessed and trimmed for Early Literacy teaching and for advising parents on how to respond to their children.

Some of the shared Oracy Literacy practices in local homes are: Reading religious texts and newspapers, story-telling and Reading to young children—there should be much more of this. Singing and chanting songs, impromptu composing of songs and rhymes, telling news of local happenings, telling jokes; some writing e.g. filling forms, shop lists, writing letters and notices. Longer narrative stories e.g. "telling how it used to be long time"—entertaining family stories of long ago, family discussions and helping with home work.

A Family Literacy programme can help parents to grow in confidence for participating in and guiding the LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR CHILDREN at home. It can encourage fathers to spend more time with their children and read to them. This will also strengthen the home-school link.

Questions to consider: *How can one involve young parents in the Literacy learning of their children? *How can fathers be made to understand the importance of their roles in the Literacy development of their children? **Does the absence of fathers have a connection with the lower achievement of males in national examinations? ***Where do I find literacy training to keep up with my child and to improve myself?

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Index of Keywords and Terms

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V viewing, § 4(11)
Y young children, § 2(3), § 3(7), § 4(11)
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Chatterbox and Family Literacy in Trinidad and Tobago
These modules are placed together to encourage dialogue among teachers about new ways to approach the study and teaching of Literacy. The hope is that the pragmatic slant described here will assist others in looking for "home-grown", workable approaches that could solve Literacy problems.

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