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Invitations to sing : a home-school literacy partnership

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Abstract

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Invitations to Sing:
A Home-School Literacy Partnership

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Abstract

This paper focuses on fostering parent involvement in their children's school life, particularly the writing process. While acquiring literacy, children model behaviors of those around them, both at home and school. Schools need to build genuine partnerships that honor the voices of teachers, parents, and children.

Dr. Luis Baptista, the Curator of Ornithology at the California Academy of Science, wanted to see how birds learn songs. Using white-crowned sparrows, he housed single fledglings in cages:

". . . where they could see and hear an Asian strawberry finch. The young birds could also hear several dialects of their own sparrow songs, but they could not see those sparrows.

The fledgling sparrows didn't learn their own songs. Instead, they matured, singing the songs of the Asian finches with whom they socially interacted" (Stoll, 1995, p. 59).

Many parents believe their children are coming home from school "singing a new song." As parents hear words, such as "redrafts," "writing process," "portfolio," "rubrics," "invented spelling," they feel left out of the cage. This new jargon is baffling and can make parents feel excluded or incompetent.

A teacher's strongest ally in fostering children's literacy is the home. With every aspect of children's lives (e.g., technology, community, family) affecting their learning, strong family involvement in school programs can not only add power to the family song but to the school's program as well. Criticism and apathy on the part of parents come from not knowing the tune.

Learning in the Nest

The noted linguist, Noam Chomsky, believes that children are born with biological patterns for language. In light of the complex nature of language, it would be difficult without a prebirth program or network ready to accept such knowledge (Chomsky, 1977; Pinker, 1995). Within the brain, there is a narrow window of time to learn language and a "stimulating environment is required to enable natural curiosity, intelligence, and creativity to develop, to enable our biological capacities to unfold" (Putnam, 1995, p. 332). Experiences provide needed structural connections much like the interior framing of a building. "The brain of a newborn human is like a new house in the final stages of construction. Most of the rooms are finished, but they haven't been decorated yet. It's not yet a home. All the fixtures and appliances are installed, but they're not necessarily hooked up." (Donahue, 1985, p. 285).

Children's journey into literacy can begin within a loving family structure or under the cruelest of conditions. Even though some children lack nurturing caretakers to model language through their formative years, they will still acquire speech that allows them to create meaning. Language appears to be innate (Pinker, 1995).

Most children grow up in an "ocean of print" and begin absorbing knowledge about alphabetical symbols and making

connections between meaning and words as a way of getting their needs met (Smith, F., 1994). Oral language transfers into symbols for names, logos, or trademarks as children learn, for example, that tall, yellow double arches mean Ronald McDonald and hamburgers. Children test the nature of their world by sorting through their environment of print and sound.

Wanting to "master the mystery" of written communication, children begin with visual images (Smith, F., 1994). When my son was four and had been sent to his room for a now forgotten transgression, he appeared a few minutes later and gave me a note. On a sheet of paper was drawn a circle representing a face with a smile upside down and a tear streaming from one eye. His message was clear.

"Our species thinks in metaphor and learns through stories," states Mary Catherine Bateson (1994, p. 230). Parents engaging in literature experiences with their children foster literacy long before children are involved in the school's language arts programs. "A story well-told or a book well-read is one of the priceless seeds of literacy, which, once grown, can be pruned and guided to spread in different directions . . ." (Fox, 1993, p. 94). Hearing language is crucial. Experiencing stories read aloud gives children a sense of rhythm, enlarges vocabulary, and becomes an integral part of their being. Children will ask for stories to be repeated over and over and hearing great

literature beautifully delivered gives children tools for the future (Fox, 1993).

Families and caregivers are models of language, even though they may be unaware they are teaching. "The phenomenon of learning takes place in diverse ways and we'd be fooling ourselves if we believed it happened only when we 'teach' in the narrow sense" (Fox, 1993, p. 109). Before coming to school, children will have hooked up many of their language abilities. Beginning with interpersonal activities, children will have learned to organize their daily life using print. Then as they become more fascinated with print, intrapersonal dimensions are added and children will seek individual ways to use language experiences (Taylor, 1983). The "family song" with its rhythms of speech and patterns of learning will be absorbed from the adults around them (Smith, F., 1994; Morrow, 1985).

In the past, educators, in some cases, have made parents feel that their assistance in educating fledglings was not needed. Schools may have sent messages through the use of packaged reading programs, new math, and other forms of instruction that the tasks of teaching are best done at school (Cairney & Munsie, 1995). As a result, literacy did not flourish. Leaving parents out is like leaving out yeast when making bread. Education and the bread remain flat.

Parents know more about their children than anyone else. They have far greater power to effect change than the teacher and they need to be viewed as partners (Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Routman, 1991). Many parents have shared with their children through the preschool years multitudes of literature experiences, such as nursery rhymes, folk tales, and other literature works (Adams, 1995). As teachers gain insight into family values and practices, they can strengthen the home-school bond and find ways for children to share stories with significant members of their communities.

Connecting the unique family environment to the one at school may be a challenge for educators. Even within a print-rich American culture, not all children start school with the same knowledge about the written word. Parents are on many levels of literacy also. Factors such as lifestyles, economic concerns, and other life stresses can siphon attention away from children, but the common thread woven through any nest is that people want what is best for their children.

Studies point to a strong relationship between literature experiences and language development (Dorotik & Betzold, 1992; Koeller, 1981; McCormick, 1977). Rasinski & Fredericks (1989) relate that "given proper guidance and support, parents can supplement, in a powerful fashion, learning that takes place in the school" (p. 84). Some programs for young children, such as

Title 1, mandate parent involvement. Extending reading time at home is one activity parents are asked to monitor (Smith, C., 1991).

Schools can encourage parents to acquire books through library loan or by purchase. Children need to witness caregivers engaging in the many different functions of language--the written as well as the oral. Most parents want to be involved in their children's emerging literacy. Those who understand the strategies being used in the school program can be a source of support for the school. Their voice can enrich the harmony of their child's song (Stillman, 1989).

Sharing the Song

As I made transitions in my fourth grade classroom that represented the whole language instructional development concept, I revised some teaching strategies for writing and my role as a teacher. The learning environment needed to nurture students' involvement in this language process to create meaning rather than to offer abstract assignments and drills. To inform parents of this approach to literacy, I sent a letter home near the beginning of the year inviting them to a workshop that would explain the writing process and its terminology. As parents arrived for the workshop, they were handed a small piece of colored clay and encouraged to create a form. By rolling,

pounding, pinching, and poking, they gave the clay shape. During this activity, requests for help were made and ideas and clay were exchanged. Some asked if they were doing the right thing. Some parents appeared intimidated and were not actively involved in the process.

After parents completed the clay project, we discussed how this activity parallels the writing process their children are engaged in at school. Some writers will quickly select their topics and begin to write without hesitation. Others will be reflective or will avoid risk-taking. Either with a clay creation or a piece of writing, a form is decided on (discovery of a subject), and the piece is analyzed (awareness of audience). To create a clay image, clay must be moved, added, or removed (searching for specifics). Pink clay may be borrowed for ears on a blue cat (peer collaboration). Some may squoosh the clay back into a ball and start over (redraft). The last touches are smoothed out (editing and polishing), and then the clay figures go on display (publishing). Catroppa (1982) relates that conversing among participants and the instructor about the task facilitates growth and gives direction throughout the creative process (conferencing).

The parents and I discussed the metaphor and concluded that writing like molding clay has similar components. Time and effort are needed to form a clay image or to write a piece. We discussed

the components of the process and shared our feelings associated with its exploration and risk-taking. I shared that expectations of equal achievement based on age for all children is inappropriate when children differ as they work toward emerging writing abilities. When engaging in the writing process, students need to feel safe in order to take risks as they create meaning through this language process. Polishing comes after other tasks have occurred.

Because modeling is so important and writing activities need to be an integral part of family activities, I invited parents to continue their partnership in their children's emerging literacy and suggested a family project of keeping a journal. Examples of journal entries might be a special occasion, such as camping or field notes from bird watching. Also, a more extensive family writing project might be a collection of memories of older members that may soon be lost, a family newspaper, a cookbook, or a photo album with narrations.

New Melodies

Believing that we do not hear enough literature read aloud, I asked families to continue to read aloud to their children. Often when children begin to read for themselves, this family activity slowly withers. Writer and speaker, John Trelease

strongly advocates reading to all students through high school and college.

Another strategy I used to increase listening to literature at school and home was to offer books on tape. Age-appropriate kits which included a paperback copy of a novel with an accompanying tape and an assessment sheet that was completed at the end of the listening experience were checked out from the room. Students could listen to a tape while reading along in the book or the whole family could enjoy a book together. When Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (New York: Dial, 1977) was added to the collection, the class was so eager to hear it. They chose to listen to it as a whole group each day and then discussed it. One family, traveling to Denver, chose to listen to Gary Paulsen's Hatchet (New York: Bradbury, 1987) and thought it an interesting way to cope with the long miles. They reported this experience and gave them some common ground for discussion.

To support my fourth graders' understanding of story, my students and I wrote letters to each other this year about our reading experiences. I began to see students developing approaches to literature, such as relating to an author, understanding why an event was included in a book, and developing empathy for a character. One student wrote after reading Joseph Krumboltz's *Onion John* (New York: Crowell, 1960) that he was upset "that they tried to change Onion John's way of life after he had

been living like that for yea(r)s." As the children's literacy emerged, I wondered: What continuing growth would I have seen if there had been more time for reading and reflection and how can I expand family involvement more?

Singing a Common Song

Parents responded to the family literacy activities through a response sheet at the end of the year. Many families wrote in their summaries that their children had spent more time engaged in writing at home and that they became more interested in school. One family reported that they had written a family history. The parents both grew up in the Midwest and have adopted children from Chile, Paraguay, and Korea. The parents believed that their child's interests and enthusiasm were broadened: "It gave her greater understanding that we all came from different backgrounds, but we make up a family unit." Another parent reported her daughter "is not so scared to make mistakes now, so she has been writing more." Parents agreed with Peter Stillman (1989) when he said, "I don't know of a greater, wiser gift than words written down."

Every family gives its children a song that is unique. This literacy is personal power as it emerges over time with the support of the home in collaboration with the school. Schools not only prepare readers and writers of today, but the nest builders

of tomorrow. Will they sing their own song, or those of others? Will every child be able to say, "Every single night I get in bed and hug that book and start singing it" (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 80). True partnerships between adults who care for children can make it happen.

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